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THE GOLDEN SUMMER

Also by Anne Duffield

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TAFFY CAME TO CAIRO
TOMORROW IS THEIRS
WILD MEMORY

To Lora, one grey afternoon in London, came a delightful invitation. Would she spend the summer at the Château de Beauvoir, tucked away in a lovely valley in the foothills of the Pyrenees, where the Countess d'Anely de Vaucours, a friend of her aunt, was opening house to the American families stationed nearby?

The valley was enchanting that summer, the Château de Beauvoir, sheltered by the mountains, nestling in its vineyards, a place of beauty. To Lora, soon happily immersed in the social round of the château, the months stretched ahead in an aura of enchantment. But too soon this undiluted happiness was clouded with the complications of her deep love for Gervais, the son of the Countess, who was already betrothed. And the delightful Francine, 17-year-old stepdaughter of the Countess, and Gervais's ward, also betrothed according to custom to an eligible son of a neighbouring family, fell in love with an American officer and brought violent scenes to the serenity of life at the château.

But it was a golden summer despite these clouds and before its end even they were dispersed.

THE GOLDEN SUMMER

by

ANNE DUFFIELD



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CHAPTER ONE

'Chocolat et brioches, mademoiselle, et du beurre.'

'Merci.'

'Vot' service, mademoiselle.'

The plump waiter in his striped blue apron trotted back into the dim recesses of the café. Lora, seated at one of the spindly tables on the vine-shaded *terrasse*, broke a *brioche* in half, spread it thickly with fresh sweet butter, took a rapturous bite. Delicious. She had forgotten the taste of real butter. She finished the *brioche*, broke a second, spread it still more thickly and consumed it. Then she relaxed, sipping the steaming chocolate and gazing out at the deserted *place* that dozed in the sunlight.

It was a very small *place*, studded with round, worn cobbles; there was a grass-plot in the centre where a shabby stone fountain lazily tinkled. The low, surrounding houses with their tiled roofs, colour-washed fronts and flower-decked window-sills had faded to soft, indeterminate shades; they were like a drawing in pastel. Dominating the square, if anything so unpretentious and serene could be said to dominate, was a little church of Spanish design, its apricot walls mellowed by countless summer suns. A dog of uncertain breed slept soundly at the foot of the shallow steps; a black cat slipped like a shadow from an alleyway; there was no other sign of life.

'Abode of ancient peace,' Lora quoted to herself. Tucked away, forgotten, guarded by the fierce, romantic mountains, the Pyrenees, of whose lower ranges she had caught breathtaking glimpses today.

The clock in the bell tower chimed, and as if at a signal the drowsy calm gave place to a measure of activity. Shop doors opened; people converged from side streets. A man on horseback, riding with a long stirrup, clattered past the café, leaving with Lora a fleeting impression of negligent

ease and a lean, dark-eyed face under a broad-brimmed hat.

A huge wagon, loaded with casks and drawn by two massive Percherons rumbled along the cobbles; it had gaily painted wheels and bore upon its side the name *Château de Beauvoir*. Lora's slender figure tensed; her eyes, with their singularly large pupils and gold- and green-flecked irises, widened excitedly. *Château de Beauvoir*: the unknown estate for which she was bound; she was waiting now for the post bus to carry her on the final stage of her journey.

A group of young Americans in uniform appeared, walking with a characteristic loping step, chattering in drawling voices. Their several pairs of eyes unerringly discovered the girl at the café table; one of them pursed his lips for a wolf whistle, was suppressed by a friend who clapped a hand over his mouth, and with backward glances they went their laughing way.

Lora's pretty eyebrows drew together in a quick frown. Not that she resented their gay audacity but they struck an incongruous note and their advent had startled her. The next moment she smiled, remembering that it was thanks to these same Americans that she herself was here, sitting under a grape vine in a dapple of sun and shadow, eating *brioches* and real butter and drinking French chocolate.

The way things happened! The extraordinary jigsaw pattern of which one was a part. She rested an elbow on the zinc table-top, cupped her chin in the bent hand as her thoughts flashed back to that astonishing afternoon some three weeks ago.

It had been a poor sort of day-at the studio; the light all wrong, the atmosphere both close and chilly, the smell of paint rags and chalk dust and turpentine and banana-oil—a smell that ordinarily Lora loved—suddenly intolerable. As she made her way home to Aunt Ella's snug little house in Kensington she had felt bored, at a dead end. She was tired of London with its grey streets, its endless queues and

crowds of dreary-eyed people; she had an overwhelming craving for heat and sunshine, for some exotic and stimulating landscape. This would certainly not be provided by the month at Frinton which was all she had to look forward to; a holiday pleasant enough, of course, with numerous relatives and family friends, but one could hardly call it inspiring.

Well, there was no use whining. Everyone was in the same dull boat nowadays. Lora, normally a gay and sweet-tempered young girl, made an effort to shake off her unwonted depression as she entered the house and ran up to the small Edwardian drawing-room with its highly polished mahogany and glazed rosebud chintz.

Her aunt, Lady Clare, welcomed her with a smile. She had been reading a letter and was folding the thin, closely written sheets as her niece came in.

'Darling,' she said, 'would you like to spend the summer in France?'

Lora gasped. 'Would I *like*—but we couldn't possibly, Aunt Ella, on a twenty-five pound travel allowance.' For this was the strangled year of nineteen-fifty-two.

'Not we, dear, just you, if the suggestion appeals to you. I have had a letter from Louise de Beauvoir, the Comtesse d'Anely de Vaucours as she is now. You have heard me speak of Louise?'

'I vaguely remember. Wasn't she at the finishing school in Paris with you and Aunt Mary? And came over to stay with you and married an Englishman?'

'That is the one. She owns an old family estate, somewhere not far from the Spanish border. They grow grapes, among other things, and make wine. Not one of the famous vintages; I fancy, it is just for local consumption.'

'And—she has asked me to visit her?' Lora breathed. 'Oh, Aunt Ella—but why——'

'Not exactly to visit her. She is starting a guest house and very much wants a young Englishwoman to act as a sort of hostess. A girl "*bien élevée et sérieuse*", as she expressed it, someone whose standing and upbringing I can vouch for.

She knows I have a niece living with me and suggests that you yourself might consider it. She would pay only a token salary, enough to give you pocket-money, but that is neither here nor there. The point is, it would mean a holiday abroad; Louise does not intend to keep the *pension* open after September.'

'What a heavenly ideal! A whole summer in that fascinating part of France—on a private estate—and think of the fun of being hostess at a French guest house. But——' Lora wrinkled her white forehead, 'I don't understand. Why does she want an English girl? Surely she doesn't expect English guests?'

'Oh, no. The reason for the venture is that a great aerodrome is being built down there and the Americans are either building or supervising it. Many of them have their families stationed in France with them, and apparently there is no accommodation for tourists anywhere in the vicinity. So Louise has decided to open this *pension* where the wives and children can come for their holidays. What she wants of you, is to make them feel at home, someone who speaks their own language and can organize games and picnics and dances. But read the letter for yourself, dear.'

Lora took the letter, which was written in English interspersed with French, and perused its contents, while her aunt regarded her with affectionate complacency. Shining chestnut hair, hazel eyes black-lashed under slim black brows, fair skin, straight little nose and warm red mouth. A pretty child, mused Lady Clare, and how unusual it was to find talent allied to beauty. In her own opinion beauty was vastly more important, but Lora by some miracle combined the two.

Ella Clare was an elegant little woman of fifty. At the age of thirty-five she had been left a widow, with no children, and when shortly afterwards her youngest brother and his wife were drowned in a yachting accident, she had virtually adopted their orphaned daughter.

Lora was now twenty-three. At school she had developed a distinct gift for painting and had later studied at a

well-known art academy in London where she still attended weekly classes. She loved her painting and worked hard at it but was well aware of her limitations; she would never be a great artist but hoped, in time, to succeed in one of the lesser branches.

She finished the letter and handed it back to her aunt.

'It all sounds thrilling. Do you think I am sufficiently *sérieuse* to satisfy the countess? I'll do my best, anyhow. She writes very good English, this Louise d'Anely. de Vaucours. What a perfectly delightful name.'

'It is, though I can never think of her as anything but Louise de Beauvoir. As for "Mrs. Cartwright", it sounded absolutely absurd, applied to her.'

'That was her English married name?'

'Yes. She married Sir Mortimer Cartwright's son, Charles. Distant connections of your grandmother's and Louise met him at our house. A case of love at first sight, on each side. There were a good many heart-burnings among the other girls and their mothers: Charles was considered a good catch and he was a remarkably handsome young man. Tall, dark, with one of those fine-drawn faces you sometimes see in Celtic people. The Cartwrights were an old Norfolk family, but his mother had Highland blood.'

'What was Louise like?'

'A fascinating girl, not strictly beautiful but somehow outshining everyone else. High-spirited and with a very dominating personality.'

'She ruled her husband?'

'To a great extent, yes, but I was thinking more of what happened afterwards, concerning the boy.'

'What did happen? Do tell me all about it, Aunt Ella.'

Aunt Ella complied.

It had been, she said, a disastrous affair from the Cartwrights' point of view. Sir Mortimer and his wife had strongly opposed the match; both came of clannish, exceedingly insular stock, Charles was their only son and they could not reconcile themselves to the idea of a French daughter-in-law. The marriage took place, however, and the young

couple were established, close to the family home, on the farm which was Sir Mortimer's wedding gift to his son.

Louise continued devoted to her husband but from the first she hated Norfolk; the flatness, the fens, the chill mists and bitter winds. Every three or four months she was off on a flying visit to her own home. Her mother was dead, and she made her father's loneliness her excuse.

All those who were interested in the success of the marriage hoped that a child would arrive and put an end to this restlessness, but it was some years before one appeared. At length she gave birth to a son whom she named Gervais, after her father, to the extreme annoyance of Sir Mortimer. Despite his name, the boy became the apple of his English grandfather's eye. At the age of eight he was sent away to school; there was a terrible scene with Louise over this but her husband, for once, overruled her. Then, when Gervais was ten years old Charles died of influenza. To the consternation of everyone, Louise immediately packed up, withdrew her child from his school and carried him off to France.

'Sir Mortimer was outraged,' Lady Clare said, 'but there was nothing he could do about it. Charles's death was very sudden, no guardian had been appointed for the boy and his mother had sole right to him. The Cartwrights never saw Gervais again.'

'Never?' Lora echoed. 'You mean she didn't even bring him over for a visit or ask them to visit her?'

'She refused to bring him to England, and made it plain that Charles's parents would not be welcome at the Château de Beauvoir. She had always disliked them, and knew they disliked and resented her. She wanted to make a definite break. Possibly she might have softened later, as Gervais grew older, but then the war came, and Sir Mortimer and his wife both died before it was over.'

Lady Clare went on to say that she had always kept in touch with Louise until the outbreak of war. After the Liberation, she wrote at once to see how it fared with her old friend and Louise replied, telling her all the news. She was safe and well and confessed that the hostilities had

scarcely affected the tenor of life in her part of the country. Nevertheless, great changes had taken place in her personal affairs.

In the autumn of '39 she had married an old friend, the Comte d'Anely de Vaucours, a widower with a little girl. Not long after the marriage M. de Beauvoir, Louise's father, had been killed by a fall from his horse and she had inherited the estate. She was living there, with her second husband and the two children, carrying on in her beloved parent's footsteps.

'Since then,' Lady Clare concluded, 'we have exchanged yearly letters at Christmas. In nineteen-fifty she wrote to say that the Count had died of typhoid fever. His young daughter was remaining with her stepmother.'

'Goodness, Aunt Ella. Everyone connected with the countess seems to die. She sounds like a witch or something. What has become of the son, Gervais?'

'He is also at the Château, managing the place for his mother.'

'Has he never come to England to see his father's people? He must have a lot of relations over here.'

'No, he has never been over. Louise would not have encouraged it and, in any case, his English relations probably mean nothing to Gervais. He has been brought up, since the age of ten, wholly as a de Beauvoir.'

'What a curious situation. An English boy—do you suppose he has become a complete Frenchman?'

'I don't see how he can be anything else, in the circumstances. But you will find out for yourself, when you get there.'

'When I get there!' Lora caught her breath. 'I just can't believe I am really going. I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels.'

'L'addition, mademoiselle.'

Lora, absorbed in her recollections, looked hastily up to see the waiter tendering a slip of paper.

'C'est que mademoiselle ne veut pas rater l'autobus,' he ventured, apologetically.

'Oh, thank you, I must not miss it, I was forgetting the time.' She spoke very passable French, an accomplishment Aunt Ella had insisted upon. He assured her that she had plenty of time to walk in comfort to the terminal, which adjoined the little railway station; she had left her baggage in the *consigne* there.

It had been arranged that she was to be met, here in Ste. Anne, by a car from the estate, but when she arrived by the local branch train she had been approached by the station-master who, inquiring if she were the English lady, Mademoiselle Russell, informed her that a message had come through to say that unfortunately she could not be met and must proceed by the post bus. She would have, he said, about three-quarters of an hour to wait, and kindly directed her to the café where she could find refreshment. Lora had been undismayed; it was all part of the fun and the new experience.

As she walked through the square, not quite in comfort because the footway, like the roadway, was studded with those uneven cobbles, she caught sight of the man who had ridden past the café a short time ago. He had dismounted and stood with an arm resting on the neck of his horse while he talked with one of the shopkeepers. Their discussion was animated; presently the shopkeeper said something to which the other replied by a mock-threatening gesture with his riding-crop, then swung himself into the saddle and cantered away.

One of the Americans, off duty, Lora decided. She knew that Americans rode with the long stirrup in that easy, deceptively casual-looking style. An attractive young man, so far as one could judge from two brief glimpses. She wondered whether she might meet him, later on, and rather hoped she would.

The post bus had arrived and a considerable number of people were waiting to board it as she came to the station. An attendant brought her baggage from the cloakroom and piled it on the roof of the vehicle which was already crammed with a variety of bags and baskets, crates of live poultry,

sacks of grain, bicycles, and various other articles. Lora climbed inside and was fortunate enough to find a seat beside a fat peasant woman; a score of people were standing as they started off at breakneck speed.

It was her first experience of a French country bus, and a distinctly hair-raising one. There seemed to be no regulation concerning the quota of passengers or, if there were, it was blithely disregarded. People descended at this and that stopping-point but always more got in. The road was mountainous, winding up and down in a series of hairpin bends which the driver negotiated with the utmost nonchalance; for a time, Lora was too nervous, and too much occupied in trying to remain in her portion of the seat as they swerved and swayed, to appreciate the scenery. Eventually she calmed, telling herself that this journey was accomplished daily and, one could only assume, without accident. She let herself go to the movements of the bus instead of resisting them, and so acquired her balance. Then she was able to take stock of the countryside and her fellow travellers.

It was a country of steep, wooded hills, wild ravines and occasional narrow valleys. It had a primeval look, an air aloof and independent; a proud country, stubborn and changeless. The passengers had much the same air; they were apparently all peasants and their glances at the alien English girl were not friendly, but Lora knew that French peasants in remote districts are seldom forthcoming to strangers. They did not have the earthy, cloddish aspect which characterizes many of their counterparts: their faces were alert and sharp-featured, with bright black eyes. They held themselves well and looked confident and self-respecting. Not an endearing race, thought Lora, and she would not care to fall foul of one of them, but an interesting, individualistic type. They spoke a patois of their own; she could make nothing of it.

'Château de Beauvoir!'

The driver pulled up with a jerk; Lora's heart jumped, pink colour flamed in her cheeks. She had arrived.

Half dazed, and with knees a trifle unsteady after the rickety drive, she descended from the bus. A motor shooting-brake was parked at the entrance to a side road; a chauffeur in livery and an old woman in a black frock, white apron and starched white bonnet with long plaid ribbon streamers stood beside it. They came forward with pleasant smiles of greeting; the man busied himself with the luggage, and the woman, introducing herself as 'Nanon' explained that Madame la Comtesse had been desolated by the contre-temps; the car which was to have met mademoiselle in Ste. Anne had refused to start and the shooting-brake had not been available at the time as it had gone off with a load of produce and had only returned half an hour ago. Madame la Comtesse had feared that mademoiselle might be exhausted and perhaps *souffrante* from the rough, crowded journey and had sent Nanon to meet her with a little flask of brandy and a bottle of eau-de-Cologne.

Lora assured the good soul that she was in need of neither. The side road, a private avenue, wound through neglected parkland beyond which were glimpses of spreading fields and vineyards. This valley appeared to be of greater extent than any they had passed on the way, sloping down to a distant dense forest on the left of the main road and backed, upon the other side, by dark green hills. The de Beauvoir estate lay between the road and these foothills.

'*Voilà, mademoiselle, le château.*' The old nurse, or house-keeper, or whatever she was, pointed a gnarled finger. Lora gazed eagerly ahead.

The château stood upon a small eminence where once a feudal castle had stood. A ruined portion still remained; a crenellated gate flanked by two towers, and a high stone wall pierced by slits from which bowmen had once sent their arrows. The manor-house adjoined one of the towers; a rambling, low-caved building, ancient and lovely, with an air of comfort rather than elegance. Lora, who had expected an imposing but austere mansion with a tall mansard roof, was surprised and delighted.

They drove into a flagged courtyard and drew up before

an arched doorway. The door was open and a woman came swiftly forward.

'So this is Lora, the little niece of my old friend Ella.' She kissed the girl on both cheeks. 'I am happy to welcome you.'

'I can't tell you how happy I am to be here, countess.'

'But such a drive—that so terrible post bus—if only Gervais had been here, he knows about these car engines. But he had departed beforehand and Jean is not a mechanic, he has only learned to drive as yet.'

'It didn't matter a bit about the bus. It was great fun.'

'Ah, I see you are a good, adaptable child. Come in, my dear, Nanon will take you to your room and then you will come to the salon for a cup of tea.'

She led the way into a stone-floored hall hung with faded tapestries and hunting trophies. She was a woman of middle height, very erect, with iron grey hair coiled high on the top of her head, aquiline features and keen grey eyes whose expression at the moment was kindly but which could, Lora guessed, turn hard if occasion warranted. An aristocratic-looking woman, sure of herself, unused to opposition. In repose her well-cut mouth was set in very firm lines but she had a warm smile that lighted the cool grey eyes and transformed the autocratic face.

Nanon now took charge, escorting the visitor up a flight of broad stairs and by way of several passages into a big bedroom with a low ceiling and arched casement windows. It contained a tester bed with muslin hangings, a walnut dressing-table and marble-topped washstand with flowered crockery, a tremendous wardrobe and some straight-backed chairs. Jean, accompanied by a youth, brought up the luggage; Nanon inquired whether mademoiselle wished her to unpack. Lora thanked her and said she would unpack for herself. The other, with no little pride, then showed her the guest bathroom; a sobering apartment, vast, dim, with wooden-encased appurtenances of unfamiliar shape. Having done the honours, Nanon withdrew, saying she would return in a quarter of an hour to conduct mademoiselle to the salon.

Lora washed her dusty face and hands, promising herself a shampoo on the morrow. She was giving a final brush to the shining deep waves of her hair when Nanon returned; the old woman crossed the room to adjust a window curtain and uttered a disgusted exclamation.

'*Encore la veuve. Toujours, la veuve. On dirait que——*' she checked herself.

'What widow?' Lora demanded.

'Pardon, mademoiselle. One speaks from time to time without thought. It is no affair of mine,' Nanon replied, looking as if she felt it very much her affair. 'If mademoiselle will come, Madame awaits her——'

The salon was a stately room with a beautiful crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling and a fireplace of Italian workmanship in alabaster. Apart from these two light and delicate objects, the general effect was heavy. The furniture, of which there was a formidable quantity, was elaborately carved and scrolled; the curtains and upholstery were of maroon damask. There were numerous small tables crammed with silver and porcelain knick-knacks; several plants, resembling rubber trees stood in the windows whose panes were draped in stiff white lace.

The countess was seated at one side of the fireplace, in front of which was a gros-point screen; facing her, stood a woman who had evidently just arrived and could be none other than the '*veuve*' who had excited Nanon's displeasure.

She was a stout, plain-faced woman of middle age with a large, pale mouth, a pointed, inquisitive nose and small bluish eyes. She was wearing a long-sleeved, high-collared dress of unrelieved black whose skirt brushed the tips of her old-fashioned glacé kid shoes. Her hat was a depressed mushroom shape and from it depended an immense, *crêpe*-bordered veil that engulfed her shoulders and fell almost to the hem of the dress. Lora had never seen anyone, except a nun, so swathed.

'Ah, here you are, Lora,' the countess said, in French. 'Let me present you to my *belle-sœur*, my sister-in-law, Madame de Bernine.'

Madame de Bernine extended a hand and said she hoped she was not *de trop* on this first afternoon but she had been so warmly interested in the niece of dear Louise's English friend, that she could not resist coming over at once to meet her. The countess, courteously but with a touch of crispness, replied that Angele knew she was always welcome, while Lora murmured an appropriate response.

A young girl appeared in the doorway; a girl with a kitten's face, forget-me-not eyes and infantile, silvery-blond hair. She was wearing a scarlet, open-necked shirt and navy-blue cotton slacks which she had rolled half-way up her calves in imitation of the popular jeans. The attempt was not altogether successful, one trouser leg had slipped and hung several inches below the other. Her hair was drawn back and tied in what at that time was the new horse's tail fashion, or at least a horse's tail had been intended. But the hair was not long enough for this treatment and the result was more like a silky, uneven shaving-brush sticking straight out behind her head. Lora's eyes danced at sight of her, and when the child made a polite obeisance, a relic of her convent curtsy, the effect in combination with her costume and ridiculous coiffure was such that the elder girl had much ado not to laugh aloud.

'This is Francine, my stepdaughter,' the countess said. 'Mademoiselle Lora Russell, Francie.'

'Just Lora, please,' the other smiled.

'I am enchanted to make your acquaintance, Lora,' Francine said in careful English of which she was palpably proud. 'I hope you have had a comfortable journey and that you left Madame your aunt, in England, enjoying good health.'

Bless her, what a little poppet, thought Lora as she replied in kind.

'*Tiens*, what have we here?' Madame de Bernine exclaimed. 'One would say a type from a low-class *café chantant*. No modest girl of good family dresses like that, Francine. I wonder you allow it, Louise.'

'I have not before seen it,' Louise returned, 'but it is

practical; she has been working among the vines. I confess, however, that I find no reason in the rolled-up legs.'

'It is the mode, maman. The American mode.'

'A very ugly one. And if you find your hair oppressive, can you not take the trouble to pin it neatly to your head?'

'But this, too, is the new style. There are pictures of it in the fashion magazines that Lucienne brought down from Paris.'

'Well——' the stepmother spoke tolerantly, 'but do not let Gervais see you in your new style. He will not be amused.'

'If she were my daughter——' the *venue* began.

'But I am not your daughter, Tante.'

'Come, come,' the countess admonished, 'you forget yourself, my child. That is no way to speak to your aunt. Apologize at once.'

'I beg your pardon, Tante. I am sorry.'

Madame de Bernine sniffed.

'If you ask me, Louise, she is getting out of hand. Mark my words, unless you take a firmer stand you will regret. Remember the source——'

Francine's exquisite little face flushed, she cast a murderous glance, the glance of a killer-kitten, at the black-swathed figure. The countess said mildly but decisively:

'Enough, Angele. Francie was impertinent and has apologized. It is finished. How do you like your tea, Lora? Cream and sugar?'

Some time later Lora was again in her bedroom. After partaking of straw-coloured tea and sweet biscuits she had been directed by her hostess to unpack her baggage and take the hot bath for which she must be longing after the tiring journey.

'And it will be wise,' the countess continued, 'to wear wool. You have brought woollen jumpers? *Bon*. The temperature falls at sunset and although the evenings are still warm, you are fatigued and have been all day in a sun to



which you are unaccustomed. It is necessary to take precautions against chill.'

Lora obediently replied that she would wear what the countess suggested, and having taken her bath she put on a ballet-length skirt of thin, moss green jersey and a short-sleeved jumper with a round, low neck in the same shade. Her eyes took up the colour, they too looked green between their dark fringes.

As she emptied her bags and stowed their contents away in the great *armoire*, her buoyant movements reflected her happy state. It was even better than she had anticipated. Already she felt at home in the old manor; she admired Madame la Comtesse with her authoritative air, her obvious sense of justice and fine French manners; the seventeen-year-old Francie was certainly a poppet.

True, the young English guest had not taken to the widow de Bernine, but that was a small matter. She suspected that Tante Angele represented something in the nature of a cross to her sister-in-law who accepted the infliction as only French people do accept their less engaging relatives. Angele belonged to the family; when this was said, all was said.

It only remained now to meet the son, Gervais. Lora hoped he would prove a congenial personality but was somewhat dubious. It was unreasonable to blame him in the circumstances but it went against her grain to think of an English boy being turned into a Frenchman. A man, moreover, dominated by his mother—the fact spoke for itself—under her thumb and content to occupy so undignified a place.

Weak. Definitely a weak character. And a fussy, conventional *monsieur* into the bargain, Lora added, recalling what the countess had said about his not being amused by his small stepsister's modish effort.

She finished her unpacking and decided to make a short tour of exploration. She ran down the stairs, meeting no one, and out to the courtyard. As she crossed the flagstones and took a path to the right bordered by a yew hedge, she heard the sound of horse's hooves, cantering up the avenue.

A few moments later the rider came into view; with a shock of surprise and a quickening of her pulses she recognized the American whom she had seen earlier today in Ste. Anne. He must be a friend of Gervais'; no doubt the family had made sundry friends among the personnel at the aerodrome. Probably he was spending the week-end here and had been lent a mount for an afternoon's excursion.

She stood watching him as he approached, her green skirt melting into the deeper green of the hedge in the gathering twilight. He was unaware of her until he had come within a few yards and was turning in the direction of the stables. Then he saw her, and sharply reined in his horse.

'Miss Russell?' He dismounted, the rein and his broad-brimmed hat in one hand as he offered the other.

'Yes, I am Lora Russell,' she answered, pleased that he had evidently been told about her. 'You knew I was coming to the château?'

He gave her an astonished look.

'Naturally I knew that my mother was expecting you.'

'Your mother!' She gazed incredulously at the handsome, dark-eyed face under the ruffled black hair. 'Then you——' she could scarcely believe—'you are——'

He straightened his shoulders and made her a formal bow.

'Gervais de Beauvoir, at your service, mademoiselle.'

CHAPTER TWO

For a breathing-space Lora stood silent. Her immediate reaction to the discovery of his identity had been one of frank pleasure; he had attracted her, captured her interest at first sight when she supposed him to be an American officer whom she might or might not eventually meet. That he should turn out, instead, to be the son of the house, the young man about whom she had speculated with considerable misgiving, seemed the culminating delight in an eventful and delightful day. But his introduction of himself offended her.

So he repudiated not only his father's country but his own patronymic. The countess, doubtless, had wished him to be so called, but what sort of man was it who submitted, once he was of an age to choose for himself, to adopting his mother's maiden name? Lora, for her part, could never respect such a man.

'What is the matter?' he asked, and now she noticed the trace of accent that coloured his fluent English. 'Why are you amazed to find that I am your host?'

'For a very silly reason,' she replied, recollecting that he *was* her host, entitled to his guest's courtesy, and that his defects of character were no concern of hers. 'I had firmly made up my mind that you were one of the Americans from the aerodrome. Women do get these fixed ideas, you know.'

'An American. I.' He did not appear gratified. 'Your mind is agile, mademoiselle. It conceived and fastened upon this idea as I rode towards you?'

'Oh, no. Before that. I saw you today in Ste. Anne when I was waiting for the post bus. You rode past the café where I was having chocolate and I caught sight of you again while you were talking to one of the tradespeople.'

'Waiting for the post bus,' he echoed. 'But what happened? Jean was to meet you in Ste. Anne with the car.'

She explained what had happened.

'This is too much,' he said. 'There are other cars in the neighbourhood. One could have telephoned—Lucienne would have been only too pleased—I cannot understand why my mother did not think to ask her. Or why it did not occur to Nanon.'

'I am very glad it didn't occur to them. I should hate to have such a favour asked on n.y account from a total stranger. It is a long drive and might have been most inconvenient. Besides, the bus was an adventure; I enjoyed it.'

Gervais smiled.

'No one enjoys the post bus. You are all that is amiable, Miss Russell, but I fear you must have taken a poor view of our hospitality. I am more sorry than I can say. But there you have it——' his smile gave place to a frown of annoyance, his voice rose and quickened, 'everyone and everything at the château is disorganized since this mad obsession took hold. Nothing else is considered, all is turmoil——'

Anything less in turmoil than the château this afternoon, Lora had yet to see. Suppressing a strong desire to laugh at this abrupt flare of temper and unjustifiable statement, she said:

'*What* mad obsession?'

'You should know, mademoiselle, since you are here to assist in it.' He did not look as if he considered it to her credit.

Lora's jaw dropped.

'You mean—the guest house?'

He nodded.

'But don't you think it will be a success?'

'On the contrary, I think it cannot fail to be a success.'

'Then——' her forehead wrinkled perplexedly, 'you don't *want* it to succeed?'

'I do not want it at all.' He smiled again, his momentary rage subsiding as unpredictably as it had arisen. 'But be assured that I appreciate very much your coming to give your time and help to my mother. I am sincerely grateful, even while'—he gave her a quizzical look, 'I tell myself that your

presence is bound to contribute greatly towards the success of this *pension* venture.'

'I hope you are right,' she rejoined gaily, warmed by the compliment and the way in which it was turned. He had charm, this young man, whatever his defects. 'I shall do my best not to disappoint my hostess. But it is a pity that this means disappointing my host. Why are you so much opposed to the *pension*?''

'For no reason that would appear—*raisonable*—to you. Put it down to my——' he broke off as the horse, which had been standing mildly patient, suddenly shied and backed. '*Attention, Colombe. Qu'est-ce que tu as?*'

Lora uttered a smothered cry. The twilight had deepened to dusk and something large, black, something that looked like a monstrous bat had materialized behind them. The next instant the girl realized that it was Madame de Bernine, advancing silently from the courtyard in what must be rubber-soled shoes.

'*Mademoiselle Lora?*' she inquired, peering. She had removed the depressed hat and long veil but her head and shoulders were enveloped in a flapping shawl. '*Et toi, Gervais?*'

'Good evening, Tante. As you see, it is mademoiselle and myself.' Gervais' tone was studiously polite. Colombe stood quiet again under his master's soothing hand.

'One asked oneself what had become of her,' the widow said. 'Louise awaits you in the salon, Lora, to drink an *apéritif*. She has invited a guest to meet you. Lucienne is here, Gervais, so it will be well for you to go and make yourself presentable without further delay.'

'I will do so, Tante. *À bientôt, mademoiselle.*' He swung into the saddle and clattered away to the stables. Lora, feeling like a rebuked schoolgirl and strongly resenting it, accompanied Madame de Bernine into the house.

She wondered whether she were expected to apologize for being late; well, if she were, they could go on expecting it. She had been told the hour of dinner; nothing had been said about an *apéritif*. It still wanted half an hour to dinner-time.

She had a perfect right to go out of doors if she wished, and chat with Gervais—at this point in her fulminations they reached the salon where the countess and Francine and another girl were seated.

‘Well, my dear,’ the countess said cordially, ‘is the unpacking finished? And are you feeling rested and refreshed?’

It was abundantly evident that she had neither been ‘awaiting’ Lora nor surprised at her non-appearance. What an officious busybody the widow was!

Finding that no explanation was required of her, Lora willingly volunteered one.

‘It is all finished, it did not take very long. I went out to explore a little and met Monsieur Gervais as he was riding in. We introduced ourselves and stood talking until Madame de Bernine came to remind us of the time.’

‘Gervais is returned? *Bon*. Now let me present Mademoiselle Lucienne Tessier, the daughter of my oldest and dearest friends whose estate adjoins our own. I have been telling Lucienne about your unfortunate experience.’

‘If only I had known, I could so easily have driven to the station,’ Mademoiselle Tessier said, speaking in English as the elder lady had done. ‘Enchanted, Miss Russell. I have been looking forward to meeting you and my mother hopes soon to have the pleasure of receiving you at Les Chenes.’

She was a girl of about Lora’s own age, not pretty but bearing herself with an air that gave the illusion of beauty. Her olive-skinned face with its mobile mouth and gay, quick-glancing eyes was, in Lora’s opinion, fascinating; she had an adult poise, her manner vivacious but not girlish.

‘Yes,’ the countess said when Lora had suitably responded, ‘I do not know where my wits were in not thinking to telephone Les Chenes and ask for a car. However, Lora assures us that she bears no ill-will. She speaks our language well, Lucienne, so let us now converse in French as Madame de Bernine knows no English. You will drink a glass of vermouth, Lora? And you Angele?’

Francine handed them their glasses.

'I have been told you are an artist, Miss Russell,' Lucienne said as they sat down. 'I envy your talent.'

'It is a very small one,' Lora smiled.

'But no, that is your modesty speaking. I am sure it is not so small. You will be painting some pictures while you are here?'

'Oh, yes. I can hardly wait—the subjects I have found already. That adorable *place* in Ste. Anne for one.'

'I shall like very much to see your paintings, if you permit. I am on holiday, my generous employers have given me three months because I had pneumonia a short time ago. It is unnecessary, I am fully recovered, but they have insisted.'

'What is your job, mademoiselle?'

'A marvellous one,' Francine put in. 'Lucienne works in Paris, Lora.'

'A sinecure, at any rate,' Lucienne said. 'I am employed at the American Embassy in Paris as one of their interpreters, I specialized in English at school and I was so fortunate in having Madame le Comtesse and Gervais to practise upon in the holidays.'

'That got your ear attuned, of course.' Lora wondered for a moment why Madame la Comtesse had kept up her English and seen to it that her son did the same, considering her determination to turn the boy into a Frenchman. Then she recollected that, according to Aunt Ella, Louise was nothing if not practical and must be fully alive to the advantage of Gervais possessing a second language.

'You would be better employed at home, my dear Lucienne,' Madame de Bernine observed, 'attending to the comfort of your parents. How you, their only child, can leave them, and how they can consent to your doing so——'

'Pierre and Yvonne have moved with the times, Angele,' her sister-in-law said. 'I am at one with you in thinking it a bad thing, this modern craze for rushing off to seek work, not from necessity but a craving for change and excitement. I wish Lucienne had been content to remain at home, but since she was not content her parents felt they should not stand in her way.'

'In effect, I am spoilt,' Lucienne declared cheerfully, 'but at least I can count on the support of Miss Russell who has also left home to take a job, not from necessity but a desire for change. Am I not right, mademoiselle?'

Lora, laughing, admitted that she was right.

'Then we must stand together, shoulder to shoulder, we two moderns. Here appears another who disapproves; *n'est-ce pas*, Gervais? Are you not a reactionary of reactionaries?'

He had entered the salon as she spoke, pausing by his mother's chair to raise the hand she offered him to his lips.

'*Ça va, maman?* Good evening, Lucienne. A reactionary? Possibly, in some respects, but I refuse to commit myself until I am in possession of your context. What is the point at issue?'

'They are talking about Lucienne's parents allowing her to do what you and *maman* would never allow me, Gervais,' Francine said aggrievedly.

'Such as?' He filled a glass from the decanter and looked amusedly at his young stepsister who had changed from her shirt and slacks into a white frock.

'Living in Paris and——'

'Living in Paris! You? At seventeen?'

'I don't mean now. I mean when I am Lucienne's age.'

'When you are Lucienne's age, Francine, we can review this momentous question. Let it rest until then.'

She made a little face, and came to him as he seated himself on a settee. He drew her down beside him.

Madame de Bernine said:

'Francine in Paris. That would be truly something. Show a little sense, Gervais, I beg of you.'

The countess said:

'There are seven years to elapse before Francine is Lucienne's age. We need not trouble ourselves as yet, Angele.'

'Do you mean to say you will let her go? Consider, Louise.'

'How can I tell what I shall feel in seven years time? Or

what may have happened meanwhile? In any case, it remains with Gervais. He is her guardian.'

'He is, indeed,' the widow said with some bitterness, 'and one asks oneself why my brother should have appointed a stepson guardian to his daughter rather than his own sister.'

'Guardianship is more the affair of a man, Angele. Alfred did rightly.'

'That depends upon the man. If Gervais is going to allow this madness of going to Paris——!'

'I have not yet said that I intend to allow it, Tante. Like maman, I await the eventualities of seven years.'

'For my part,' Lucienne said, 'I am sure that if Francine did leave she would be back next day a victim of malignant homesickness.'

Lora heard it all with amused interest. How intense French people were, avid for argument, snatching at the slightest topic, seizing upon it, tossing it back and forth. Francine's initial remark had been a mere childish outburst, signifying nothing, but the others had instantly, in Lora's jargon, made a 'thing' of it.

Dinner was announced and they went into the dining-room, which Lora found more to her taste than the crowded salon. It was in the oldest part of the château, a room reminiscent of an ecclesiastical refectory, with a beamed ceiling and plastered walls decorated with faded frescoes. The long, narrow table was covered by a shining white damask cloth; in the centre was a rococo silver-gilt epergne filled with fruit, flanked by matching candlesticks. The forks and spoons were of silver, the steel knives had bone handles and razor thin, razor sharp blades. At each place was a single carving rest; the forks were changed for each course but one kept the knife until it was no longer necessary to use one.

The abundant, beautifully cooked meal was served by a young maid under the watchful eye of Nanon. Lora did full justice to the excellent clear soup, the *pâté de campagne*—a spicy concoction of flat noodles covered with chopped liver

and chives and green peppers in a brown sauce—the great dish of green peas served as a separate course, the roast chicken and endive salad. There was no sweet; the dinner ended with cream cheese and *bar le duc* conserve, followed by fruit. They drank a mild red wine; a Château de Beauvoir, the countess informed Lora.

‘But, as for that,’ she added smilingly, ‘everything we are eating this evening is Château de Beauvoir. You will find only wholesome, home-grown food here.’

‘How fortunate your American guests will be,’ Lora said. ‘I suppose you grow enough to supply the *pension*?’

‘More than enough. There is always a big surplus that cannot be disposed of. Now we shall turn a dead loss into a gain. One would think,’ she glanced at her son, ‘that this would appeal to any landowner.’

‘I am not the owner,’ Gervais smiled, ‘and it does not appeal to me.’

‘You would prefer to continue losing?’ Lucienne inquired. ‘You are unreasonable, my friend.’

‘The estate can bear it,’ he returned.

‘Why should the estate bear it,’ his mother protested, ‘when we have this chance to make some additional money? The Americans are prepared to pay well; we shall clear a very nice sum.’

‘We do not need this extra money and it is not worth what it will entail.’

‘It entails no great outlay. We have the means at hand; the empty house, the surplus produce—it would be flying in the face of Providence not to avail ourselves of the opportunity.’

‘We have already availed ourselves. The matter is settled. It is your concern, *maman*, not mine.’

‘But I wish also to persuade you, shake you out of your stubborn attitude.’

‘You will never persuade me. I shall, of course, do all that is necessary, see to it that your guests are well fed and treat them with due respect. For the rest——’ he shrugged. ‘Shall we agree to disagree and leave it there?’

They'll never leave it there, thought Lora.

They didn't. The countess persisted that there was no justification for this stand of his; Madame de Bernine said it was news to her that anyone in these days did not need extra money, and if Gervais could afford to throw away this not inconsiderable sum his financial affairs must be in better shape than she had suspected. Francine said the guest house would bring some life to the château and she could not understand why Gervais wanted his family to live shut up in a cage. He sat silent under the barrage, a small fixed smile on his handsome mouth, but Lora, watching him covertly from under her lashes marked the tightening of the young face, the smouldering dark eyes.

'There will be an explosion if they don't stop it,' she said to herself. It was Lucienne who applied the spark.

'You haven't given a single convincing reason for your objections, Gervais. Why are you so set against this plan? Is it because you don't like Americans?'

'Not at all. I like them very well in their own sphere. I am prepared, if the need arises, to welcome the Colonel and his staff as their host on a social occasion. But I do not want them here by right.' Once again his voice raised and quickened. 'I do not want the place overrun by people who, because they are paying, must be given the freedom of the estate. I do not want undisciplined American children romping in the gardens, rooting up flowers, destroying the vines, defacing and climbing the ruins and breaking their legs or their necks——'

'If you so dislike American children,' Francine put in, 'you shouldn't mind them breaking their necks.'

'*Tais-toi, Francine.*' He shot her a lightning glance. 'Your comments are not required. Finally,' he continued, 'I do not want to see the ancient Dower House, one of the beauties, the treasures of the valley, turned into a boarding-house. *Voilà.*' He thrust out his hands. 'You asked my objections.'

Well, that was telling them, Lora said inwardly, feeling a trifle breathless after this blazing tirade. Lucienne laughed.

'Did I not say so? A reactionary of reactionaries. He would like to keep the estate, the entire valley, closed against outsiders.'

'I plead guilty.' Gervais spoke in his normal tones and gave them his quick, charming smile. Lora felt a little shock, as if something had lightly yet sharply tapped her breast. He changed so quickly; he had been angry, his sensibilities outraged, yet in a flash it was gone. Or if not gone, controlled. She was oddly affected, touched, although she told herself that 'touching' was the last word to apply to this unpredictable and spirited young man.

They had finished their coffee by this time, and adjourned to the salon. With curtains drawn and the lamps in their puffed-silk amber shades alight, the room had a more homely atmosphere. Lucienne, at the countess's request, played one or two semi-classical selections on the old-fashioned square piano; her execution, as she admitted, was not brilliant but she did what she could to the best of her ability without any tiresome protest.

'And now,' she said, 'Francine must give us a song. I will accompany her.'

Francine, blushing, said no, they did not want to hear her, she who had never had a lesson in her life. It was evident that she was shy of performing in front of the comparative stranger, Lora.

Gervais said, 'We always want to hear you. Come, *bébé*, do not be silly.'

'I ask myself——' the widow de Bernine seemed to be in a constant state of self-interrogation, 'why you encourage her, Gervais. I should have thought——'

'I will sing,' Francine interposed and went swiftly, with her singular lightness and grace of movement to the piano. She sang two little *chansonnettes* in a small sweet voice.

'Bravo,' her stepbrother applauded. She ran to him and resumed her former place beside him.

'Do you play or sing, Lora?' the countess asked. Lora regretted that she could do neither.

'Ah, well, one cannot have every accomplishment. Tell

us about your painting, what it is you do. Portraits? Landscapes?’

Lora told them, and a brisk discussion on painting and painters ensued. Bless them, she thought, they can't really be interested but they know it is *my* topic——

The porcelain clock with its garlands and cupids struck the half hour. Lucienne rose to take her leave.

‘You drove over by yourself?’ Gervais inquired. ‘I will drive you back.’

‘It is not necessary, that short distance, and it will mean you must walk home again.’

‘I am capable of walking that short distance, Lucienne.’

She began to say her polite good-bye and he turned to Madame de Bernine.

‘Do you go back to your villa this evening, Tante? If so, and you are ready to leave, we can drop you on our way?’

‘If I am not intruding—I told Marie not to expect me back, but I have no desire to be a nuisance,’ the widow began.

‘Of course you will stay the night, Angele, if you care to,’ the countess said.

How beautifully polite they were, the English girl reflected, to the tedious woman.

Lucienne and Gervais departed, and shortly afterwards the countess dismissed Lora to bed.

‘You are fatigued, and must have a long sleep. No, Francie, you are not to go with her and chatter.’

Lora, suddenly realizing that she was very tired indeed, said her good nights and went off to her room. In dressing-gown and slippers, carrying her sponge bag and towel she made a trip to the impressive bathroom; returning, she found Nanon in the bedroom holding a cup and saucer.

‘A *tisane*, mademoiselle. It will calm the nerves and induce sleep.’

‘Thank you very much.’ Lora, accepting it, sat down on the side of her bed and took a sip of the steaming, bitter camomile. The other stood regarding her with wise old eyes; the slender young figure, drooping a little, the dark

hair brushed out and hanging childishly around the pale face, the tired shadows below the lovely eyes that looked all dark pupils now because they, too, were tired.

'You are a long way from home,' Nanon said. 'Shall I stay while you drink this and then tuck you up as I do Mademoiselle Francine?'

'I should love you to tuck me up, Nanon. Are you, were you, Francine's nurse?'

'Not until she was four years old. I belong here, mademoiselle; at the age of fifteen I came to the château as nursemaid when Madame la Comtesse was born. It was a deep sorrow to me when she went away, and a joy when she returned, with Monsieur Gervais, and later married Monsieur le Comte.'

'Did Monsieur le Comte live in this valley?'

'His family had an estate here. Monsieur left home when he married his first wife, and lived in Paris. He came back when his parents died and he himself had become a widower. His sister, widowed and childless, had also returned to her former home. Then Monsieur and my mistress were married, and when Madame's father was killed, Monsieur sold his own place, a much smaller property than Beauvoir, and came, with little Mademoiselle Francine, to live here.'

'And his sister, is Madame de Bernine?'

'Yes. She was not pleased by the arrangement. But she has little to complain of; a villa was built for her, of a size sufficient for a lady and her maid, on this estate! It is not far; one can approach by road, or simply walk through the vineyards. One walks, in very truth,' said Nanon with sudden venom, 'at all times, all your——' As before, she hastily checked herself.

'I suppose,' Lora knew this was gossip but could not resist trying to draw the old woman out, 'Madame de Bernine is lonely and perhaps feels it a little hard that her brother's child should have continued to make her home with her stepmother instead of her aunt.'

'It is true,' Nanon responded, 'that the *veuve* resented not being appointed guardian to her niece. One must be just,'

she added with obvious reluctance. 'After all, Madame is Mademoiselle Francie's own kin; Monsieur Gervais is no blood relative.'

'I quite see her grievance,' Lora said, 'but she did not strike me as being very fond of Francine.'

'Madame has strict ideas about the upbringing of young people.' Nanon spoke now in a repressive tone, as if belatedly remembering that it was not for her to discuss her betters. 'You have finished your *tisane*, mademoiselle? Then if you will take off your gown and slippers——'

Lora saw that there was no more to be got out of her for the present, and submitted to being tucked up under several fleecy blankets and the enormous, slippery *plumeau*, an eiderdown to end all eiderdowns. Nanon then firmly closed the windows, said '*Bon soir, mon enfant, dormez bien,*' turned out the light and left the room.

Lora lay still for a few minutes, then slipped from the bed, made her way in the darkness to the nearest window and opened the casement. She knelt down, her crossed arms on the sill, and gazed out into the night.

The air, heavy with the scents of flowers and vines and sun-baked earth was warm and there was no breath of wind. It was a moonless night and the sky had become overcast; she could distinguish nothing clearly except a light here and there in the distance. She wondered whether one of them shone from Les Chenes, Lucienne Tessier's home. A short distance, Lucienne had said. Gervais should be soon returning.

Desperately tired, but keyed to a pitch that as yet made sleep impossible, her thoughts milled to and fro, reviewing the events of the day, coming to rest upon the evening she had just spent. A girl playing the piano, a girl singing, a young man of twenty-six or seven, a man of vivid personality and undepiable attractions content to sit quiet, listening and applauding—Lora had felt herself transported backward in time a generation at least.

She recalled what her travelling companion, the elderly, chatty American wife of a French industrialist with whom

she had shared a compartment as far as the junction, had said:

'They live a life of their own down there and they haven't changed since the year one. Too comfortable and too self-sufficient. You won't find any great fortunes among them but they do live well off their own land and export enough wine and fruit and things to make a nice surplus. Great horse people; the district is so cluttered up with hills and gorges and cliffs, the roads run every which-way and it is often simpler and quicker to get on a horse and ride cross country when they go visiting. They don't care what goes on in the rest of the world, hardly knew there was a war on. Well,' the American lady had laughed, 'it's a good life if you can stand it; personally I'd go crazy.'

Lora had agreed that she would probably go crazy too if she had to live there for ever.

Small wonder, she reflected now, that Lucienne had wanted to get out. Nevertheless, she had to admit that there was something very pleasant in this outmoded existence; something reassuring, solid, standing fast and untroubled by the febrile, ever-shifting pattern of life in general today.

As she knelt there, musing, Lora caught the sound of approaching footsteps and saw the glowing tip of a cigarette. Gervais. She crouched down, although there was little danger of being detected, and heard him enter the hall—her room overlooked the courtyard—and the countess calling to him.

'Come into the boudoir, my son. The others have retired. I have water boiling in the spirit kettle and we can drink a *tisane* together.'

'I think, maman, with your permission I will drink something more interesting.' He crossed the stone floor with a quick, light tread, a door closed and Lora heard no more.

Her tension relaxed. With a sense of satisfaction, a sort of 'Now everyone is safe at home and we can lock up for the night'—a sensation surely uncalled-for on the part of a newly arrived guest—she got up from the floor and took a

last look out at the calm dark landscape pierced by those small steady lights. Suddenly she was swept by a fellow feeling for the reactionary Gervais; she, too, would like to keep the château and the entire valley closed against outsiders. It had apparently escaped her that she was an outsider herself.

CHAPTER THREE

'Je n'en vois pas la nécessité.'

Very distinct, very startling, like the disembodied speech of doctor or nurse one hears when emerging from an anaesthetic, the words struck upon Lora's ears. Ominous words; she was in that post bus again, or the wraith of the post bus, careering madly along a dark precipitous road; she was terrified, everyone was terrified, someone must have begged the driver to stop and he had answered cynically, fiendishly—the flimsy vehicle rocked, it was overturning——

Lora's eyes flashed open, she sat up with a jerk. Sunlight streamed through her window; she was in no bus, but the soft tester bed, and the man who had said he saw no necessity was not the phantom driver of a nightmare coach but Gervais arguing with someone in the courtyard below.

Lora drew a deep breath, pressed her hands against her temples and sank back against her pillows. What a dream!

'Necessary or not,' the countess was saying, 'the Colonel has telephoned that he would like to inspect the house and naturally I have agreed.'

'If he thinks to find dirt or disorder,' the wrathful voice of Nanon proclaimed, 'in the rooms whose cleaning I myself have supervised—inspect, indeed! Does he not appreciate the privilege that is being extended? Does he not understand who and what are the owners of this property?'

'It is simply a question of Army routine, Nanon. He is responsible for the welfare of the wives of his officers.'

'It sees itself,' Madame de Bernine affirmed, 'that this inspection is the duty of Monsieur le Colonel. Gervais is merely being obstructionist, as usual.'

'And what harm can it do?' Francine demanded. 'By tomorrow or the next day the Dower House will be filled

with Americans, so why should Gervais object to one or two of them coming today to have a look at it?’

‘If one may be permitted to get a word in,’ Gervais said, ‘I can assure you I have no objection to their coming but to giving up my morning. I had made other arrangements. Nor do I see why I am needed.’

‘It is a matter of *politesse*, my son. I should have thought it superfluous to remind you of that.’

‘Very well, maman. My appointment shall be postponed.’

‘What was it you had intended doing?’

‘Ride over to Delamain. Philippe has secured the shipping contract he was angling for. Now it appears that he cannot entirely fulfil the importers’ requirements and they have agreed that the extra cases can be made up from one of the other valley estates. He approached me yesterday when I ran into him in Ste. Anne, and I said I would see him this morning and discuss the matter.’

‘In that case, you must go. If he takes our wine, it may mean a shipping contract for ourselves, eventually.’

‘I can go this afternoon. I will telephone and explain.’

‘That will not do. You have made your appointment. You know what an impulsive man Philippe is, and of a temper. I will make your excuses to Colonel Howard.’

‘Let them look in every corner,’ Nanon grumbled. ‘Let them examine every beam. They will find no grain of dust.’

‘They won’t be looking for *dust*,’ Francine cried. ‘You heard what maman said. You are as bad as an old dog worrying a bone.’

‘Ah, that I should live to hear myself called an old dog. This is too much.’

‘I was only teasing. Come——’ there was the sound of a soft scurry.

‘Bad child, you take advantage of my tender heart. There then, one forgives.’

‘Well, if I am going to Delamain——’ Hooves scraped the flagstones, Gervais was evidently mounting Colombe. Lora deduced that he had been riding off when his mother

came out and hailed him and he had respectfully dismounted to hear what she had to say. The others, of course, had followed her; nothing could be done, it appeared, without a general discussion.

The horse's feet scraped and clattered again.

'Softly, softly,' the countess said, 'we are under Lora's window and may rouse her. I want her to sleep a little longer.'

Lora smothered a laugh in her pillow. Did they really imagine she was not already roused?

She got out of bed and crossed to a side window. A large garden, marked at intervals by formal cypress trees lay on this side; beyond were the vineyards and, to the right, a dense grove rising to the broken, wild line of the foothills. As she had expected she caught sight of Gervais and Colombe, cantering along a narrow track. They were a well-matched pair; she wished she could capture and transfer to canvas this fleeting glimpse of them. Gervais's dark, uncovered head, the gleam of his white shirt, the negligent grace of his pose; Colombe's lovely action, the sheen of chestnut flanks. But she knew that to paint them as they should be painted was beyond her powers.

She watched until horse and rider disappeared, a trifle disappointed that Gervais would not be coming with them to the guest house this morning; she took it for granted that, as the future hostess, she would accompany the countess and be introduced to the American Colonel. Upon second thoughts, however, she was glad that he was to be spared the ordeal. He would have found it difficult to bear the sight of these others tramping about, looking into this room and that, viewing the ancient dwelling he so dearly loved merely with an eye to its amenities as a *pension*. In Lora's opinion there had been no need for his mother to make an issue of his being there; the demands of politeness would be sufficiently met by her own presence. She knew how her son felt, or ought to know.

'She hasn't much imagination,' thought Lora. As for Gervais himself, he was certainly under her thumb. Weak—

yet she had never seen anyone who gave less impression of weakness.

A soft tap sounded on the door.

'*Entrez.*' Lora turned from the window. The young maid who had served dinner came in with a tray of coffee and *croissants*.

'So you are awake, mademoiselle. One thought one heard you moving about the bedroom.'

'I'm afraid I am very late.' Lora glanced at the watch on her wrist. 'A quarter to ten.'

'It does not matter, mademoiselle. Madame la Comtesse desires me to say that she is going to the Dower House at half past ten and will be glad of mademoiselle's company.'

Lora replied that she would be ready promptly.

She was dressed, and putting on a shady straw hat when a second tap on the door heralded the entrance of Francine.

'Good morning, Lora. Did you sleep well?'

'Very well indeed, thank you.'

Francine was again wearing the navy-blue slacks, with a shirt of paler blue, her hair once more stuck straight out from the back of her head like a shaving-brush.

'Are you coming with us to the Dower House?' Lora inquired.

'But yes. Do you ask because I am dressed like this?'

'Not at all. Everyone wears slacks in the country. I have brought some myself.'

'It has not been the custom here,' Francine said. 'I sent for mine without saying anything to maman. I would not have put them on today if Lucienne had not been wearing them when she came about ten minutes ago to ask if she could do anything for us in Ste. Anne; she was driving in. Maman cannot object to my dressing as Lucienne does. Nor Gervais either.'

'I see,' Lora smiled. 'But I wonder—please don't think me officious—if you will let me fix your hair. It is not quite long enough to be tied up so high. We can still have a sort of horse's tail.'

‘Willingly, Lora.’

Lora undid the absurd erection, shook out the silky hair that had a natural wave of its own and tied it again, well back from the small ears and lifted above the nape of the neck, but falling downwards now instead of standing out at right angles.

Francine studied the amended coiffure.

‘It is just the way I tried to make it look but I am not clever, not *artiste* like you. Thank you very much; I find it most kind that you should take an interest in my appearance.’ She slipped an arm through Lora’s. ‘We must go down, maman will be waiting.’

‘Oh——’ Lora stood transfixed. It was not only the beauty of the ancient building that affected her, she was gripped by an inexplicable sensation of having found something she had always sought. ‘It’s mine,’ she said to herself. *‘Mine.’*

With the countess and Francine she had walked across the estate in the direction opposite the vineyards, taking a path that presently led into a little wood. And then—without warning—the enclosed clearing and, facing them across a stretch of smooth turf, the Dower House.

It was a long, low building with a central doorway and tall windows almost flush with the ground, and a row of dormers above. The lower windows were framed in wide, slatted shutters, the doorway was a pointed arch. Simplicity’s self, but as the young artist’s gaze took in the line of the roof, the perfect proportions of the whole, the mellowed stone and tranquil setting she knew that she was looking at an architectural jewel. No wonder Gervais had said it was one of the treasures of the valley; ‘One of the treasures of France,’ thought the bewitched Lora.

‘See, then,’ the countess was saying, ‘how well the house lends itself to our requirements. *Très pratique, très commode, n’est-ce pas?*’

‘Yes,’ Lora agreed faintly.

'Originally,' the elder lady continued, 'this was the convent of a contemplative Order, a very small, aristocratic Order founded by the sister of our ancestor Blaise de Beauvoir. Later, it was used as the family Dower House and, I trust, will be so used again. Meanwhile, we do not allow it to remain idle.'

For a second time Lora felt a surge, a passionate surge, of sympathy with Gervais. *This*, turned into a boarding-house.

The countess led the way indoors. A stone-floored hall ran the entire depth of the building, with rooms opening on either side and a staircase rising to a landing that branched into two galleries. There was a beautiful drawing-room with the same long, low lines; it had a parquet floor and a stone fireplace. The settees and chairs looked more comfortable than those in the manor-house and they wore loose covers of saffron linen.

'It goes better so,' the countess observed, 'when there are to be children.'

The dining-room, like the dining-room at the château had plastered walls decorated with frescoes. The immense refectory table was the original Community one; it had been stored away for generations. There were two other apartments, in addition to the kitchen premises on the ground floor, a library and a morning-room.

The bedrooms were small but adequate. Lora thought them enchanting with their slanted ceilings and deep dormer windows. The countess explained that water was pumped from an artesian well; there was electricity in the house, and a telephone.

'And now,' she said, 'I will show you the rest. Colonel Howard will not arrive for another half hour or so, but I knew you would like to make yourself *au fait* with it all first, Lora.'

They went through the hall to the door at the back and out into a courtyard where there was a row of small, one-storied buildings, formerly servants' quarters and storage rooms. One or two of them were reserved for the staff, the

others had been converted into extra bedrooms for the guests. Beyond the courtyard was a kitchen garden and, to the left, an apple orchard filled with very old, gnarled, moss-encrusted trees. A dirt road led from the orchard; Lora had been wondering how cars could get to the place. The countess told her that this road joined the avenue leading from the main highway.

'Louise! Are you there, Louise?' A familiar voice was calling from indoors. Francine's face tightened.

'Tante. I thought she had gone home.'

'She did go home,' her stepmother responded, 'but has evidently decided to walk over and join us. I am coming, Angele.'

Cheerfully, betraying not the slightest impatience with her ubiquitous sister-in-law, Madame la Comtesse returned to the house.

'Shall we go over to the orchard?' Lora suggested. Before they could do so they heard someone riding towards them.

'Gervais?' Francine said. 'But it cannot be——'

Gervais it was who emerged from a wooded side track. He waved a hand, rode into the courtyard and came back on foot.

'*Mais comment?*' He cocked an expressive eyebrow at his stepsister. Sure of her ground, she replied:

'Lucienne was wearing the same sort of thing this morning when she called in after you had gone. And Lora has also brought slacks in her luggage.'

His eyes twinkled.

'So I am defeated at the outset.'

Francine nodded gaily.

'But what has happened, Gervais?'

He explained that he had met Philippe Delamain half-way between the two estates; the other man had suddenly remembered a more pressing engagement, and knowing that Gervais would have started he had come to intercept him. They had discussed the matter of the wine there and then; all was satisfactorily concluded and Gervais had ridden back.

'How exactly like Philippe,' Francine laughed. 'Always he—but who comes now?'

A quartet of riders, two men and two girls, appeared at the bend of the road. As they caught sight of the other three they broke into a hand gallop, riding as Gervais rode with a casual, almost insolent ease. When they reached the orchard one of the men gave a signal and they began to weave a fantastic course in and out among the little alleys, a ridiculous follow-my-leader that convulsed the spectators. Then they charged the kitchen garden in line abreast and abruptly halted with a flourish of riding-crops and a concerted,

'Olé!'

Lora saw that they were all very young; the girls looked about eighteen, the men not more than twenty-two or three.

'Are they Spaniards?' she asked.

'Spaniards? No. Merely imbeciles.' Gervais went forward to greet them. '*Bonjour, la troupe*. You are dismounting? Bring your circus animals into the courtyard, then.'

They rode in: Lora, impressed by their skill and amused by their antics asked whether they were brothers and sisters.

'The two ahead, Ghislaine and Armande, are brother and sister, and so are the other two, Marcel and Annette. They are all de Boncourts; their fathers are brothers who inherited a property jointly and these youngsters have been brought up as one family.'

When they had tethered their horses, Gervais presented them to Lora. They had been unaware that an English guest was expected at Beauvoir and as they acknowledged the introduction with the usual correct phrases, Lora, sensitive to atmosphere, received a vibration the reverse of friendly.

'Anglophobes,' she thought, 'although they have probably never set foot in England, or anywhere else beyond their own *département*.'

Well, there were plenty of people at home who had never crossed the Channel but, on principle, were anti-French.

Having said what was required they took no further notice of her and she stood quietly by while they chatted with

Gervais and Francine. They were fine-looking young people with a proud and independent air; an air, for all their nonsense, considerably more adult than is generally found among English girls and youths of corresponding age. Armande and Annette, like Lucienne Tessier, were not actually pretty but gave the illusion of being so; they held themselves superbly. Their brothers had alert, aquiline faces, straight-set grey eyes and strong black brows. Gervais had much the same type of face but with certain subtle differences. There was a lively warmth in Gervais's dark gaze, a cool appraisal in theirs. They were as quick to smile as he but, again, his smile was a warm and very pleasant one to meet, theirs had a hard brilliance.

'They, and Gervais, would laugh at very different things,' Lora summed it up. '*They* would laugh *at* you, no matter how cruel such laughter was. But they'd expect, and take, the same from you.'

It appeared, from the chatter, that no very recent visits had been exchanged between the two families; the quartet had ridden over this morning to call, and finding that the countess was at the Dower House had come on here. They had heard news of the *pension* project; rumour had it that Madame la Comtesse was building some sort of temporary summer camp.

'There has been no building,' Gervais told them. 'The Dower House, unfortunately, is admirably suited to the purpose.'

Ghislaine de Boncourt showed his strong white teeth in one of those brilliant, unfeeling smiles.

'Unfortunately, *hein?* One gathers that you do not rejoice in the project, my friend.'

'I don't.'

'Accept my sympathy. It is bad enough to have these Americans devastating miles of our land, rooting out forest, levelling hills with their accursed machines. One should at least preserve one's personal property from being invaded by them.'

'As for that,' Gervais retorted, 'if the Americans were not

devastating the land, building the aerodrome, we might presently find ourselves with no property to preserve. But enough; come and pay your respects to maman. Colonel Howard is inspecting the house this morning and will be here at any moment now.'

'I think,' Ghislaine said, 'that if the American Colonel is coming we shall ride on.'

Gervais shrugged.

'As you will.'

'Give our respectful salutations to Madame la Comtesse. *Au revoir*, Miss Russell, a great pleasure——' Ghislaine's cool, indifferent glance swept across Lora's face as he politely offered his hand. The others followed suit, then they mounted their horses and made off.

Madame la Comtesse and Madame de Bernine now appeared.

'You, Gervais?' his mother exclaimed. 'What do you do here?'

He told her of what had occurred.

'Ah! Good. But who has just departed?'

'The de Boncourt children. They turned tail when they learned that Colonel Howard was arriving.'

'Silly little ones. But Ghislaine has his prejudices and he leads the others by the nose.'

'It would be well for that one,' Francine flashed, 'if he were occasionally to leave the valley. He would find that there are people in the world as good as himself, and better. For my part, I find his conceit and arrogance stupid and ignorant.'

'What?' Madame de Bernine cried. 'You set yourself up, Francine, to speak so of Ghislaine, a young man of his character, upbringing and position in the community? You should be thanking *le bon Dieu* that he and his parents have condescended to express an interest in you.'

'I don't want their interest.'

'Come,' the countess interposed, 'this is neither the time nor the place to discuss the matter. Nor is anything as yet sufficiently advanced to merit discussion.'

'It will lead to no more if Francine is allowed to behave in this manner.'

'Please, my dear Angele, let it rest for the time being.'

'Very well, Louise. But I warn you again, the child is getting out of hand and Gervais does nothing to check her. He is supposed to be her guardian——'

'I *am* her guardian, Tante. You may safely leave her to me.'

'That is a matter of opinion. And it is not mine.'

The widow sniffed and turned away. Gervaise strolled over to Lora.

'One has to have them,' he murmured.

'Have what?'

'Aunts.'

'She is no aunt of yours,' Lora said impulsively, 'not even by marriage.'

'But an aunt by courtesy,' he smiled.

Courtesy, she thought, was the word, marvelling again at the way he bore with the exasperating woman. The countess, too, bore with her in the same courteous fashion but the countess, after all, was not a spirited, hot-tempered young man.

'You have seen the Dower House?' he asked. 'My mother has shown you over it?'

'Yes.' There was a vibrant ring in Lora's voice. 'I have seen it. We came through the wood, not by the road, and—so suddenly—it was there.'

Gervais's fine brows drew together as he gave her a more attentive look than he had hitherto done. Last evening he had accorded her only such attention as was due to his mother's guest, the young girl who had come to assist at the *pension*. A pretty girl, he had noted, with agreeable manners; he had not failed to pay her the compliment that came automatically to his French tongue. Otherwise, she had scarcely impinged upon his consciousness. Now, catching that note in her voice he became suddenly more aware of her.

'You liked what you saw, then?'

'Oh—*liked* it. You little know——' She looked at him

with dancing eyes. 'You imagine this place belongs to you, don't you, Monsieur Gervais?'

He gave her a smile of perplexed amusement.

'I had been under the impression that it did. Or, as I should say, to my mother.'

'It is mine.'

'Yours, Miss Russell?'

Lora nodded.

'Haven't you ever known, instantly, that something belonged to you? It doesn't matter that you can't actually possess the house or the river or mountain or whatever the object may be. I'm not likely ever to see the Dower House again, once I have gone back to England, but all the same——'

'It will still be yours?'

'Always. And I—I feel as you do about its being used as a *pension*. I wish it could be left in peace. Not that it is any of my business to say so,' she added hurriedly.

'Mademoiselle is charming.' He had relapsed into French. 'And it gives me pleasure that you should share my sentiments. No one else has done so; I have been accused on all sides, not of sentiment but sickly sentimentality. A terrible crime,' he laughed, 'to be accused of in France.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to retort, 'But you yourself are not French and we feel alike because we are compatriots.' She would have liked to hear his reaction but decided not to risk it. He was still an unknown quantity and there was no point in antagonizing him. Before she could frame any other reply a car was heard approaching, a big Army car that swept up the road, slowed just in time to negotiate the curve around the garden and rolled into the courtyard. The driver opened the door and the American colonel descended, followed by two officers. There was a general flurry of greetings, then the three men were introduced to Lora, the countess informing them that Miss Russell had come from England to act as hostess.

Colonel Howard, a grey-haired man with a kindly, somewhat harassed face, expressed immediate interest. He had spent many months in England during the war. Where was

her home town? London? He knew London well and loved every inch of it. A fine city. He and Miss Russell must get together later on and have some talks about it.

Captain Franklin, the Colonel's aide, also knew London and agreed that it was a great place; Lieutenant Carey, speaking a soft, slow drawl, regretfully said he had not yet got to visit England, but certainly hoped to make it one of these days.

As they all walked through the courtyard to the house, Lora felt convinced that the officers had meant what they said when they declared themselves pleased to meet her; she guessed that they were relieved to find an English girl, someone who spoke their language, in more ways than one, in charge of the guest house. For her part, Lora was experiencing much the same sensation. Captivated though she was by the de Beauvoir family and Lucienne Tessier and even, despite their phobia, the dazzling young de Boncourts, there was a lessening of tension, a comfortable at-homeness in the company of these Americans.

They traversed the long hall and went out to view the house from the turfed lawn.

Lieutenant Carey said to Lora in his slow voice with an equally slow and engaging smile:

'Say, this is certainly somepin! All I hope is that the gang of kids don't take it apart.'

'It is pretty solid. Come over here,' she led him to the opening in the wood. 'This is the best view.'

He stood admiring the house for a moment, then asked, 'Who is the little silvery blonde girl? I didn't get to catch her name. She looks kind of English, too.'

'She's the countess's stepdaughter, Francine d'Anely de Vaucours.'

'Help! I'll have to write it down, if you'll spell it out for me. Do I have to call her that?'

'I should call her Mademoiselle Francine, or just mademoiselle,' Lora replied, and forbore to add, 'if you find it necessary to call her anything.'

He was obviously very much taken with Francine but she

did not suppose that the French girl would be permitted to make friends with the American officers.

The Colonel was now going indoors; Lora, pleased, was delegated to do the honours. When the final bedroom had been inspected, and warmly approved, Colonel Howard went down to the drawing-room where a small *collation* had been prepared. Lora, waiting to close the dormers, looked at the lawn below. Two figures were walking towards the doorway; Lieutenant Carey and Francine. Francine's little silver gilt head was tilted as she looked up at the young man whose brown head in the jauntily worn cap was bent to hers. She moved with her fairy lightness, he with that loping, curiously graceful step. The sunlight flickering upon them, the green wood behind them, they made an irresistible picture; Lora watched them with smiling, sympathetic eyes. Then she drew back, with a little shake of her head.

'There's no future in it,' she told them silently.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Chocolat et brioches, mesdemoiselles, et du beurre.'

The blue-aproned waiter who had fulfilled this same order seven days ago, set down the big white cups and wicker bread basket, and the dish with its curls of butter resting on a vine leaf, before the two girls. Lora and Francine were sitting on the *café terrasse*; Jean, who combined the duties of family chauffeur and farm-lorry driver had driven them in to Ste. Anne to do some shopping.

The town catered principally for the simple needs of its own small population and the neighbouring peasantry but it contained a surprisingly well stocked *épicerie* where one could find such things as ripe olives, salted nuts, *foie gras* and other delicacies, and there was a very good confectioner's which sold all manner of cakes and excellent sweets. Lora had been commissioned to purchase a supply from both these shops; Colonel Howard and his lately arrived wife were giving a party at the guest house.

At Lora's suggestion Francine, with her stepmother's concurrence, had accompanied her. The errand had been quickly accomplished and they were walking towards the parked car when the younger girl said:

'It has been a very short expedition.'

Lora gave her a swift look and saw the dear little kitten face drooping. It had not so far occurred to her, but now she guessed that this had been an event for Francine. The countess, she had learned, never went to Ste. Anne; Jean drove in once a fortnight with an order for staple groceries and anything else that was needed. There was no necessity for anyone else to go and in all probability, now that the town was apt to be filled with lively young troops, the countess would not have allowed her stepdaughter to do so with no companion other than the chauffeur. Poor little thing; Lora was suddenly struck by the cloistered life this young girl lived.

‘There is no need to hurry back,’ she said, ‘unless Jean—I’ll ask him.’

Jean assured mademoiselle that his time was at her disposal, he was not required for any farm duties this morning.

‘Then suppose we go over to the café and have elevenses,’ Lora said to Francine.

So here they were, seated at the same table from which Lora, just a week ago, had gazed out at the drowsy *place* and wondered what the unknown Château de Beauvoir would prove to be.

Today, although slightly more animated than it had been on that afternoon, the cobbled square with its lazy fountain still held its air of ancient peace. And today, just as had happened then, a group of Americans presently invaded it. History repeating itself, reflected Lora, and remembered someone else, someone on horseback who had also appeared. It was more than could be expected of coincidence that this, too, should repeat itself but she could not help wishing that Gervais, who had been off on his own occasions when they left the château would now ride by, catch sight of them, cock an amused inquiring eyebrow at his stepsister and join them.

She was roused by a sound from Francine, a quickly drawn ‘Oh!’

One of the Americans had detached himself from his companions and was approaching the café; Lora recognized Lieutenant Carey. He came to them, smiling his slow, engaging smile: Lora was very sensible of his attraction. He was quite as good-looking as Gervais or either of the de Boncourt boys in his so different fashion.

Brown-haired, brown-eyed, lithe as a young panther, softly spoken and disarmingly youthful. He was, she gauged, older than the two de Boncourts but he had none of their adult quality.

‘You-all givin’ the town the once-over?’ he asked when they had said good morning.

‘We came in to get some things for Mrs. Howard’s party,’ Lora answered, hardening her heart against the expectant look in his eyes. He wanted her to ask him to sit

down with them but although it might be in order to do so she would not risk it. French conventions were formidable and in any case it was not for her to assume the responsibility of furthering the acquaintanceship between him and Francine. 'You know about the party, of course?'

'Yes, ma'am. I've been invited. I think Mrs. Howard has asked mademoiselle, here, and her brother, hasn't she? A get-together house warmin', she calls it.'

'She has very kindly asked Gervais and myself,' Francine said.

'I hear there's to be dancin'. You look like a mighty good dancer, mademoiselle.'

Francine blushed.

'I was taught ballroom dancing at school but my partners were only the other girls. I have not yet been to a dance and I do not know whether maman will allow me to go to this party.'

'Won't allow? How come?'

'How——' Francine, puzzled, looked at Lora.

'Mr. Carey was speaking American,' Lora elucidated. '“How come” means “why”.'

'Oh, I comprehend. It is to say “How does it arrive” which we say ourselves. You use the French idiom, then, in America?'

'I wouldn't know about that. Miss Russell was kiddin' me, I was usin' slang. But why shouldn't the countess let you go to the party?'

'Mademoiselle is only seventeen,' Lora said.

'Is that too young, in France?' He spoke very gently, his brown eyes on the French girl's small, upraised face. 'Back home, girls start steppin' out about sixteen.'

'I'll try to come. I will coax maman, and perhaps Gervais will be on my side.'

'There's a friend of yours comin', he told them hopefully. 'A Miss Tessier. Seems the Colonel has been entertained by her parents.'

'Lucienne? Then if she is to be there, and Lora——'

'You'll be safe,' he smiled. 'Well——' he saw that he was

not going to be asked to sit down. 'I'd better be on my way. *Au revoir, mademoiselle*, Miss Russell——' he saluted them and went off to rejoin his companions.

'Do you think they will let me go, Lora?' Francine questioned.

The note from Mrs. Howard inviting the stepbrother and sister had arrived as the girls were about to start for Ste. Anne; the countess had opened and read it and, taken by surprise, told them its contents, adding merely that she would consult with Gervais when he came back at lunch-time.

'I should think,' Lora began, then broke off, sudden colour in her cheeks, a pleased light in her eyes. A rider had trotted around the corner and stopped at the café; coincidence had not failed—she looked out and saw Ghislaine de Boncourt.

'*Toi, Francine? Bonjour*, Miss Russell.'

He dismounted, tethered his horse to a hitching post and came into the shaded *terrasse*. '*Vous permettez?*' Taking permission for granted he drew a chair to their table. The waiter scurried forward; Ghislaine ordered a coffee.

'This is a surprise,' he said, adding politely, 'I understand that Miss Russell is conversant with our language?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Good. My schoolboy English is very elementary. And what brings you to Ste. Anne this morning?'

'We came in to buy refreshments for the party Monsieur the Colonel and Madame Howard are giving at the Dower House,' Francine answered. 'Lora was requested to do so as she speaks French.'

'The party!' Ghislaine's mocking smile flashed in his hard, tanned face. 'But they are incredible, these Americans. One has supposed them barely installed.'

'They are installed,' Lora said. 'All the rooms are filled.'

'And at once, a party. It is well that the *pension* is not sufficiently close to the château for the noise to penetrate. One had heard of these orgies.'

'It won't be an orgy,' Lora returned stiffly. 'Colonel and Mrs. Howard will see to that.'

'Gervais and I have been invited,' Francine informed him.

'Gervais and you? My faith, they do not lack assurance, these people. I fancy Madame la Comtesse did not bargain for anything of this sort.'

'On the contrary,' Francine retorted, with no foundation whatever for her statement, 'maman considers it most kind and hospitable.'

'Hospitable! To ask the owners of the château to their own Dower House. You, of course, will not be permitted—but do you mean to say that Gervais intends to go?'

'Maman had not yet said whether I may or not, but Gervais will assuredly go. Lucienne is also attending. They have a wonderful electric gramophone, Lora says, that changes its own records, and there will be dancing. It is not often one has an opportunity to dance modern dances to modern music in this valley. It will be a contrast to doing folk steps to a peasant accordion and guitar.'

'For my part,' Ghislaine declared, 'I can manage very well without dancing to an American electric gramophone.'

Francine shrugged.

'Take comfort, then, in clinging to your prejudice, for you will miss much, my friend.'

'Miss?'

'These Americans whom you refuse to countenance will liven up the entire district. There will be other dances, and picnics and things. Lucienne will go, and no doubt many more of our friends. You, and Marcel and the unfortunate girls will be left to your own company.'

'We shall survive. As for you, Francine, I should not count upon these parties and picnics. I think Madame will have other views.'

'So long as I am with Lora,' Francine affirmed, again without the slightest justification for what she said, 'maman will rest content.'

'Indeed? My compliments, Miss Russell. To have inspired such trust at so early a stage is truly admirable.'

His tone was ironic, bordering on insolence. She was stung, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing it. Lightly and with indifference she replied:

'Monsieur is too kind,' and turned to the younger girl. 'Francine, if you have finished your chocolate, shall we make a move? We must not be late for lunch.'

'I am quite ready, Lora.'

'If one might venture a word of advice, Miss Russell,' Ghislaine interposed.

'Advice? I am willing to hear it but cannot promise to take it,' she rejoined airily.

'I would remind you,' he said, 'that English ways are not our ways and I am sure Madame la Comtesse would not care to have Francine sitting on a café pavement alone with yourself in this town where American troops are constantly swarming. The café is not out of bounds to them and you are placing yourselves in a position which could lead to unpleasantness.'

The curve of Lora's pretty mouth straightened, her eyes were hidden for a moment by their soft fringe of lashes. Insolence with a vengeance. Then the lashes swept upwards and she met his bright, hostile gaze with composure. She was outraged, but she was not to be daunted, far less intimidated by this arrogant young man who led his troop by the nose and appeared to consider it his god-given right to domineer over all and sundry. A man, moreover, who must be at least a year younger than herself, if not more.

'I hardly think,' she said, 'that Francine and I were in any danger at eleven o'clock in the morning in the centre of the square.'

'It is not a question of danger but of being subjected to annoyance. These troops, in common with all troops, contain a percentage of irresponsible, ill-conducted men. I do not presume to dictate your own behaviour, I merely ask that Francine should not be submitted to the risk of embarrassment.'

'It is no business of yours,' Francine cried hotly. 'I am accountable to maman and Gervais, not to you.'

'And I,' said Lora, so angry that she had difficulty in controlling the quiver in her voice, 'am accountable to Madame while I am her guest, and to no one else.'

'Do you think, then, that Madame would approve if her stepdaughter were annoyed by some impertinent soldier, possibly a drunken one who might insult her?'

He spoke evenly; he was clearly to the last degree exasperated with them but he wasn't fiery like Gervais. Equally high-spirited, his temper was colder, or perhaps it was that he kept it under better control. 'He might be thirty,' Lora thought, 'rather than twenty-one or two.'

Aloud, she retorted,

'Need we go into that? Francine has not been, and is not likely to be either embarrassed or insulted.'

As luck would have it, at this precise moment another uniformed group swung into view. They caught sight of the two girls and inevitably, singled out the fair-haired one for their passing attentions. There were wolf whistles, unsuppressed this time, and joyous cries of 'Hiya, Blondie,' the haughty stare of Monsieur de Boncourt only adding to their impish enjoyment. They passed on; Ghislaine said,

'You see.'

'What harm did that do me?' Francine demanded, looking more elated than dismayed.

'It is not for the daughter of the Comte d'Anely de Vaucours to be whistled at and addressed as "Blondie" by a rabble of private soldiers.'

Lora uttered an irrepressible giggle.

'You found it amusing?' he inquired caustically.

'I think your attitude unduly serious, Monsieur. They are only high-spirited boys. And I don't see how that sort of nonsense can be avoided if Francie comes into Ste. Anne at all. It had nothing to do with our sitting here, it could just as well have happened while we were shopping, which we were doing with the countess's full approval.'

'That is true, but you miss my point. If I had not been here with you they might have come into the café and attempted to impose themselves on you.'

'I doubt it, but at any rate you *were* here, so we have been protected. And now——' she had had enough of this, 'Francie and I really must go.'

Ghislaine escorted them to the car. He did not reopen the topic as they walked the few yards to where Jean awaited them; he handed them in, said a polite *au revoir*, gave Lora a look which seemed to say that he considered her presence among them an unfortunate circumstance and closed the door.

'That one, there,' Francine exploded as the car moved away. 'He is intolerable. I apologize, Lora, for the way he spoke to you.'

'He spoke according to his lights,' Lora returned cheerfully. 'He was really very much upset. It's all right, Francine, don't let's think any more about it.'

She was still angry and more than a little shaken by his attack but she had no intention of making an issue of it. The de Boncourts were intimate friends and distant connections of the de Beauvoir family; it would be an awkward situation, to say the least, if the countess's guest were on outwardly bad terms with one of them. She must preserve appearances with the intolerable Ghislaine, as doubtless he would with her.

The secondary road by which they drove homewards was very much shorter than the post route and had been long ago built for the express purpose of connecting the valley estates with the railhead, extending only to the end of the valley itself. It followed the line of a ravine and was a comparatively level stretch along which the huge, cask-laden wagons drawn by their Percherons still majestically rumbled as they had rumbled for generations. In spite of the delay occasioned by the altercation with Ghislaine, the girls arrived well before the luncheon hour which, at the château, was one o'clock instead of the more customary twelve or half past. Lora ran upstairs to take off her hat and dispose of the packages which she would take to the Dower House this afternoon; coming down again she saw Gervais in the open doorway of the great hall.

'Good morning, Lora.' During the last few days they had slipped easily into first names. 'I hear you and Francine have been to St. Anne. Was the shopping successful?'

'Yes, we found everything that Mrs. Howard wanted.' There was the suspicion of an edge in her voice and as they strolled out to the courtyard he looked inquiringly at her.

'You are pale,' he said. 'Was the sun in the town oppressive?'

'Oh, no. I can never have enough sun.'

'Then what is the matter?'

She had already resolved to take the first opportunity of telling Gervais about the incident. It would look very odd if he heard it first from the officious young man himself, and she was convinced that Francine would not volunteer the information.

'I am in disgrace,' she replied with an upward glance, half laughing, half rueful, from under the dark lashes. 'Ghislaine de Boncourt has had me on the carpet.'

'Ghislaine de Boncourt' he echoed, astounded. 'But why—where—'

She told him, making an amusing story of it and not omitting the exuberant soldiers who had arrived so disconcertingly at that crucial moment.

'I can laugh now,' she finished, 'but it took a bit of getting over. Such an unexpected attack, it made me rather angry.'

'I can well believe it. Ghislaine can appear very offensive at times, he lacks consideration for people who are more sensitive than himself: a de Boncourt failing. But——' Gervais smiled, 'he was right, Lora.'

'Right?'

'Entirely. Which does not mean that you were wrong. It was the natural thing for you to suggest, a cup of chocolate at the café, but my mother would not have cared to have Francine, in the present circumstances, sitting there with no chaperone older than yourself.'

Lora's face changed. She looked fixedly down at the flagstones.

'I am very sorry,' she said in an expressionless tone.

'Please don't be sorry. You couldn't possibly have known. It is just that, in this district, one conforms to conventions that seem absurd to outsiders. My mother is more liberal

than, say, Tante Angele and some of the other women but she, also, has her old-fashioned taboos.'

'I will make my apologies to the countess.'

'You will do nothing of the sort. What the countess doesn't know can do her no hurt. The terrible affair shall be buried and the rest is silence. Now, do you think you could smile again?'

She lifted her head at that, and laughed.

'Thank you, Gervais. I'd much rather *not* tell the countess. And Francie, bless her, certainly won't. But Ghislaine may.'

'Not he. Ghislaine has his faults but telling tales isn't one of them.'

'He might feel it his duty. I have an idea he thinks me a bad influence for Francine.'

'I shouldn't be surprised if he does. But if he has anything to say on that score, Lora, he will say it to your face, not behind your back. All the same,' Gervais added, 'if he takes it upon himself to do so, let me know. I shall put a stop to it.'

She shook her head.

'I shan't tell tales, either. I can hold my own with Master Ghislaine.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Lora paused on the threshold of the Dower House drawing-room and surveyed the scene with the eyes of a satisfied hostess. She had worked hard today, the day of the party, and felt that the results justified her effort.

The beautiful room, so long and low—the ceiling appeared lower than it actually was because of the length of the gleaming floor beneath—had been cleared for dancing; the rugs removed, the chairs pushed back to line the walls, the parquet polished to an icy surface. The great windows were open to the warm dark night but the thin saffron curtains had been drawn across them. The gilt sconces, that once had held wax candles were lit by electric candles now, but the effect from the amber bulbs was much the same; there was plenty of light for there were many sconces along the fine old panelling, the room glowed clear and softly. Bowls of flowers scented the air; the stone fireplace was banked with shining laurel and golden fuchsias. At one end of the apartment stood the big radio gramophone, surrounded by a group of young people enjoying the American Forces programme while they waited for the final guests to arrive.

In the dining-room the refectory table had become a buffet, decorated with trailing vines and laden with sandwiches, snacks of all sorts, *petits fours*, and there would later be ice-cream. Large glass jugs of iced punch and hock cup were placed here and there; Mrs. Howard had decreed 'No hard liquor.'

The library and morning-room, as sitting-out rooms, had been filled with flowers; Lora had seen to it all, arranged the vases, decorated and superintended the setting of the table.

'You certainly are an artist, Lora,' Mrs. Howard had declared enthusiastically. She was a brisk, middle-aged woman who had taken an instant fancy to the English girl.

The other wives at the *pension* were young women in their late twenties or early thirties and there were also several girls, members of the Forces, who happened to have friends or fiancés among the officers at the camp. The children, eleven of them, ranging in age from two to ten, had been put to bed in the three little rooms which had been turned into night nurseries where, it was optimistically hoped, they would sleep soundly throughout the festivities.

'Hi, Miss Russell.' Lieutenant Carey had caught sight of her and left the group by the radio.

'Hi,' she responded, sociably.

'You came by yourself?' he hinted.

'I came early. I am more or less on duty.'

'Oh. Then—is little mademoiselle comin'?'

'Yes, she is. With her brother.'

There had been a family discussion as to whether Francine should or should not go. The invitation had somewhat disconcerted the countess and her son; Ghislaine had been right when he suggested that social intercourse to this extent with their paying guests had not entered into their calculations. But the initial shock subsiding, both had agreed that for Gervais to refuse would be highly discourteous. Francine's fate hung in the balance. It was plain that her stepmother was reluctant to let her go and Gervais much of the same mind. Tante Angele who had dropped in for lunch, said roundly that the child's going was not to be thought of, she was far too young and feather-headed to be let loose among a crowd of Americans. She asked herself how Louise could even make a question of it.

But Louise, always reasonable and just, pointed out that seventeen was not too young to start going to dances. The valley dispensed with such formalities, but if they had been living in Paris, say, Francie would be making her début. Girls all came out at that age nowadays.

'So I think,' she concluded, 'that if we refused for her it would look very marked and be interpreted as a slight. After all, she will be with you, Gervais, and Lucienne and Lora—I believe the Marsan girls and their brother are also

attending—it would be a different matter if Francine were going alone among these strangers.’

Gervais assented; Francine, who had sat in trembling silence during the discussion, now sat transfixed with rapture. Lora, smiling sympathetically across the table, wondered what Ghislaine de Boncourt would say when he heard that Francine had been allowed to attend the dance; she would have liked the pleasure of informing him herself.

Meantime, she was informing Lieutenant Carey.

‘I’m lookin’ forward to dancin’ with her,’ he said. ‘Way she walks—you noticed it? Just like she ought to be on her toes, ballet dancin’.’

‘I have noticed it,’ Lora smiled, ‘but I have no idea how she dances. I expect you’ll find she doesn’t know any very new steps.’

Lora herself was looking forward to dancing with someone special this evening; Gervais did not walk as if he ought to be on his toes but she was sure that anyone who moved, and rode, as he did must dance well.

‘Although probably he doesn’t know any new steps either,’ she thought gaily.

The radio fans turned off the programme and one of the men put a record on the gramophone, a sweeping, swooping Viennese waltz.

‘Reckon our granpaws and granmaws danced to that,’ Lieutenant Carey said, ‘but it’s still got somepin’, hasn’t it?’

She agreed that it had. Her pulses quickened to the rhythm: ‘He’ll know how to waltz, anyway,’ she told herself.

A car, followed by another, drew up at the open door giving upon the courtyard. French voices were heard.

‘That’s Lucienne and the Marsans,’ Lora said, ‘I must go—’

As she turned to hasten along the hallway two other guests, arriving on foot, appeared at the front entrance. The Colonel and Mrs. Howard materialized and went forward to greet them; Lora, glancing back over her shoulder saw Francine in billowing organza, Gervais looking

unfamiliar but handsomer than ever in his evening dress—her heart lifted on a happy wave, she ran on winged feet to meet Lucienne and the three other young French people.

The Marsan girls, twin sisters, were an attractive pair with black hair beautifully dressed, bright black eyes and piquant olive faces. They were a little shy, more than a little excited at the prospect of the dance. Henri, their brother, was a nice-looking youth who held himself with a certain stiffness. Lucienne, easy, chattering, linked an arm in Lora's as they all made their way to the drawing-room where the host and hostess awaited them. After the American fashion, the French contingent were introduced to everyone in the room; they were warmly welcomed and no shyness could long endure so friendly an atmosphere.

'Henri didn't want to come,' Lucienne said as she and Lora stood chatting by the fireplace and Francine with Gervais came to join them, 'but Madame Marsan would not let the twins come without their brother. A silly boy; for my part, I have no patience. What is it like in England, Lora? The same unreasonable ill-will?'

'Among some people, yes, and it is not confined to one side. But I think the real antagonism, where it exists, boils down to the girls. The Americans are a novelty to them, have more money to spend, make more fuss of them. I imagine there isn't any heart-burning of that sort among the country people around here, is there? Their girls are very strictly kept?'

'They are,' Gervais said, 'and the valley hamlets are out of bounds to the troops. But they get there—trust them—and what else can one expect? You can't segregate boys and girls by putting the girls out of bounds.'

They get there Lora repeated inwardly as she saw Lieutenant Carey edging towards them. And what then? But she had no time to pursue this train of thought. The gramophone struck up a foxtrot and the party began.

'May I have the pleasure, Mademoiselle?'

With a glance at Gervais, who nodded, Francine assented, fairylike in her floating white skirts, her hair, at Lora's

persuasion, released from its horse's tail and falling in silvery waves. Gervais, having correctly approached Mrs. Howard who told him her dancing days were done, asked one of the other wives; Lora, claimed by Captain Franklin, saw that she had judged aright; Gervais did dance well.

She had an occasional smiling look from him as the evening progressed, a 'family' look as she expressed it which indicated that he must do his duty before asking her. She was content, she could wait for him, it gave her the happiest little thrill to feel that she was, so to speak, a member of the Château family. She had expected that there would be a constant tapping of shoulders and interchange of partners but, for whatever reason, this American custom was not followed tonight. The numbers were even, there was no stag line and each dance was confined to a single partner.

She presently found herself beside Gervais at the buffet.

'Congratulations,' he said; he knew that she was responsible for the table and the general decorations.

'You think it all looks nice?'

'I think it is all charming. And a very good party, very well conducted.'

She gave him a pleased look.

'I am so glad. I was wondering if you were hating it.'

'Why should I hate it?'

'Because it is taking place—here.'

'As for that——' he made a wry little grimace, 'I should never have chosen to find myself a guest in the de Beauvoir Dower House. But for the rest—I hope I am not so churlish as to resent this party. And you, Lora, are you enjoying the evening?'

'Very much indeed.'

She was wearing a frock of her favourite clear green, the shade of a beech leaf in spring. Her hair had been caught back into a little chignon clasped by a narrow band of matching velvet leaves. Her adaptable eyes took up the colour; pleasure and excitement had given her a wild rose flush. Gervais set down his glass.

‘Are you engaged for this one?’

She was not engaged.

The gramophone was playing *Falling in love again*. Francine was dancing with Lieutenant Carey for the second time. Gervais and Lora took the floor; some of the youths began to sing the refrain and everyone joined in. *Falling in love*——

CHAPTER SIX

'What is the meaning of this? Have you not been told that these ruins are out of bounds? How dare you disobey orders?'

Lora, making her way towards the ancient enclosure with her sketching book, stood abruptly still. The voice was Gervais' and he was obviously in one of his blazing tempers. She guessed the reason; he must have discovered some of the American children where they had been forbidden to penetrate. He had spoken to Colonel Howard on the matter and the Colonel, agreeing that the towers and the great crenellated wall were no place for adventurous small boys, had instructed the mothers to lay the embargo. The small boys had airily disregarded it.

'Of course,' thought Lora who by this time had had considerable experience of them. They were far from unattractive children, she could not help liking them, but their upbringing, earnestly well meant, left much to be desired. They were never scolded, seldom corrected, they were encouraged to express their personalities and any form of repression was viewed with genuine horror by their long-suffering if misguided parents.

Gervais continued to thunder; Lora crept forward into an embrasure of the gateway from which, unobserved, she could survey the scene.

Five little boys, ranging in years from seven to ten stood in a row, apparently hypnotized. The five upraised faces betrayed stunned amazement; never before in their brief lives had anyone raged at them like this. Their tongues, ready and pert in general, seemed paralysed.

Confronting them was Gervais, taut with anger, dark eyes flashing. He had evidently been riding and still held his crop in one hand. As Lora watched, one of the children winced, and nursed an elbow.

'Ah,' Gervais cried, 'it hurts, does it? You are in luck

that it is not broken, or your leg or your neck. A pity you were not all of you hurt; it might teach you a lesson. You deserve a sound thrashing——'

He raised the crop.

'Heavens,' Lora ejaculated silently, 'he isn't going to *strike* them——'

The boys appeared to believe that he was. They cringed, but made no attempt to run away; they were like frightened, fascinated rabbits.

'*Eh bien*,' Gervais lowered his arm. 'We will forego the thrashing this time. But if ever it occurs again——'

'It won't,' the eldest boy quavered. 'We won't come here again, honest. Can we go now, sir?'

'One moment. You like to climb, do you?'

'Yes, sir,' they chorused.

'Then it is time you learned how it is done. Such a performance as you put up—scrambling, no method—now attend to me.'

They waited expectantly.

'This afternoon, at three o'clock, you will meet me on the lawn in front of the—of your *pension*. We shall cross the river—have you discovered the river, yet?'

'No, sir.'

'I thought not. It runs behind the woods. We'll cross over to a place where there are rocks and I will instruct you in foot and finger holds.'

'You mean—the real thing? Like those guys who climb the Alps and Everest and all?'

'Well, we shan't get as far as that. I can't give you any practice in ice or snow at this season. But every—guy—who climbs in the Alps or attempts to climb Everest started by learning the proper holds. It is agreed, then?'

Ten round eyes stared up in rapture.

'You bet it's agreed.'

'Say, listen, that sure is swell of you, sir.'

'We'll be there, waiting for you.'

'Very well. Three o'clock. Off you go now and don't let me catch you here again.' He gave them his quick, warm

smile and they departed in high feather. Lora leant weakly against the crumbling stonework; she was still not wholly inured to Gervais' lightning changes of mood.

'Bless him—he really *is*—to offer to take those kids——'

At this point he strode through the gateway and saw her.

'Lora? What are you doing here?'

'Spying and eavesdropping. I couldn't resist.'

'You heard the dressing-down I gave them?'

'I heard it all and I think it is one of the best things that has ever happened. You shook them, Gervais, and they needed it.'

'I was furious,' he said, 'and alarmed. I saw them starting to climb the left tower as I rode into the stable yard. One boy slipped and fell; happily he did himself no injury.'

'And having scared the young scamps half out of their wits, you offer to give up your afternoon and show them how to climb properly. That's a fine reward for disobedience.'

'They need guidance,' he replied, 'and an outlet. They have simply been turned loose to find their own amusements.'

'I know. But I shouldn't have thought you would care——'

'I am acting in self-defence. I want to protect my property by fixing their interest elsewhere.'

'But—is it safe? This river you speak of, and the rocks?'

'Perfectly safe. The river is only a shallow stream in our particular section and the rocks a bit of outcrop, easy and not high. They can practise their holds, and play in the water—an ideal spot for children.'

'I should like to see it,' she said. It sounded ideal but she preferred to judge for herself. Her duties as hostess were rapidly assuming unforeseen proportions and although she was under no obligation to do so she was beginning to feel a strong sense of responsibility towards the guests at the Dower House.

'Then why not come with us this afternoon,' he suggested.

'Unless it would bore you?'

Her heart gave a little bump of pleasure. She had spoken

simply what she felt, with no intention, no idea of being asked to join them. Thinking aloud, rather than speaking. Now she was frankly delighted at the prospect of spending an hour or two in the company of Gervais. She had seen little of him lately.

'It would not bore me at all,' she assured him, 'and I should like very much to come.'

'Good.' He appeared in no hurry to leave her. He glanced at the big folder she was carrying and asked,

'Have you been sketching? I have never seen any of your work. May I look?'

'There is nothing here. I was going to try an impression of this courtyard.'

'And found it otherwise engaged. What do you hope eventually to specialize in?'

'Fashion drawing and, if possible, magazine illustrating. But I probably won't succeed. I've been trying a new style, everyone is copying it these days——' she told him the name of the brilliant artist who had started it.

'Afraid I have never heard of him. Art is rather out of my line. Can you give me an idea of this new style?'

She knew he was only expressing a polite interest he did not feel, but to protest would look coy. She sat down on the dry coarse grass, opened the folder and with a sharp pencil drew swiftly for a few minutes.

'That sort of thing.' She handed the sheet up to him. 'Just to give you a rough idea.'

'Francine,' he exclaimed.

'You recognize her?'

'But of course I recognize her. It is Francie to the life, although how you manage to convey it——' The sketch embodied a collection of lines, a curve or two, an indeterminate blob of a face, yet he saw his stepsister, radiant, dancing on pointed toes in a swirl of ballet skirts.

'You are exceedingly clever,' he said. And then, in an altered tone, 'May I ask why you draw her like that?'

'Because I see her like that.'

'You had no other reason?'

'None,' she replied, astonished. 'What an extraordinary thing to say. Artists always see people in their own way.'

'I beg your pardon, Lora. For an instant I wondered whether you were being a little *too* clever.'

She was reminded of Ghislaine's portentous remark: '*It is not for the daughter of the Comte d'Anely de Vaucours to be addressed as Blondie.*' So Gervais considered this portrayal of the Comte's daughter equally *infra dig*. These people! Their outlook was positively archaic.

Ruffled, she said:

'You object to my showing her as a ballet dancer?'

'I cannot object to so charming a thing as this. But if you do a serious portrait of Francie—and I hope you will, my mother would be enchanted and so should I—don't show her in that costume and pose. It may sound nonsensical to you, but my mother——'

'I won't,' Lora interposed, 'and I had no intention of doing so. I want to paint Francine in oils, wearing her jeans and her funny little horse's tail which, I believe, amuses the countess immensely. Do you think your mother would like that?'

'I know she would treasure it.'

'I'll do it, then. As for this—I only scratched it off to show you——'

'How Francie appears to your inner eye,' he supplemented. With an unexpected and engaging access of youthful egoism he added: 'How do *I* appear to you?'

She gave him a look, not innocent of malice. His words 'Too clever' still rankled.

'If you really want to see—it will take a bit longer——'

'There is no hurry.' He seated himself on the grass and lit a cigarette while she busily applied her pencil.

'Here you are,' she said, presently. He took the sketch; it was himself, unmistakably, but himself in a Norfolk shooting jacket, a gun on his shoulder, a retriever at his side, an impression of flat, reedy marshland and wide low skies.

From under her lashes she watched him as he studied it

in silence, wondering what his reaction would be, half wishing she hadn't done it. He looked up at last, his handsome mouth a trifle grim, one eyebrow cocked in that way of his.

'There is no disputing your gift, Lora, but I cannot accept that your inner eye views me like this. What was your purpose in putting me into the dress and environment of an English sportsman?'

'It is as you ought to be.'

'*Comment?* Ought to be?'

She had gone so far now that she decided to go the whole way.

'You are an Englishman, after all, Gervais.'

'I am English on one side, certainly.'

'The side that matters. Your father's.'

'But I have identified myself with my mother's side.'

'I know you have and I cannot understand it.'

'Where is your difficulty? I left England on the death of my father at the age of ten. Since then I have lived here on my mother's estate which will one day be mine. I have been brought up on French soil, in the French manner, all my friends are French, my roots are here.'

'Yes—but—to repudiate one's own country——'

'One can hardly say I repudiated my own country at the age of ten.'

'But afterwards, when you grew up,' she persisted. 'You *are* English and it seems incredible that you never felt, never wanted, never gave yourself an opportunity of choosing. Aunt Ella said your grandfather's place was left to you, and that it was sold without your ever seeing it.'

'It was. I had no desire to visit it, Lora. I had heard enough of that flat bleak land which you have so skilfully indicated in this drawing, the bitter climate, the endless dreary sunless months, the cold houses, the good, dull people whom my mother found so uncongenial. Just heaven!' He relapsed into French, swift and fiery.

'Was I to exchange this——' he thrust out an arm and she knew that his gesture embraced not only his own demesne

but the valley, the green foothills, the wild mountains beyond, all and everything that he had lived with and loved. 'Exchange *this*,' he repeated, 'for a draughty manor and its monotonous level farmlands in Norfolk? Come, Lora, be sensible, be honest. Would you yourself make such an exchange?'

Slightly breathless, as she generally was after one of his impassioned declarations, she answered:

'When you put it like that—if I had been brought up here as you have, no, I wouldn't. I hadn't considered, hadn't thought it all out.'

'And having now considered, you no longer blame me?'

She shook her head.

'But all the same——' she was forced to say it, to bear her testimony, 'I do think you should at least have kept your father's name.'

'My father's name? So this, too, has been troubling your loyal English mind?'

'It hasn't *troubled* me,' she returned haughtily, 'but it surprised me very much.'

'The explanation is simple,' he said coolly. 'As a child I was always referred to as "*le petit Gervais de Beauvoir*", meaning literally Gervais who lives at, belongs to, the Beauvoir estate. It is customary here to identify people with their properties. When I grew older it did not seem imperative to insist upon my surname; indeed, it never occurred to me. I am Gervais, or Monsieur Gervais, to all the countryside and distinguished from any other who bears the same Christian name by the appellation of my residence. I assure you, there has been no intentional disrespect to my father's memory; for all official purposes I am, of course, Gervais Cartwright of Beauvoir.'

She was abashed, and sat with downcast head, wishing she had never started this. She fiddled with her pencil for a moment, then said:

'I have been very officious. I am sorry, Gervais.'

'There is nothing to be sorry about. On the contrary, your interest in me is profoundly flattering.'

She looked hastily up, scenting irony, but there was no irony in the eyes that met hers, only a teasing smile. She saw that he had been merely amused by her strictures as he might have been at some childish outburst from Francine. It was disconcerting to be considered an amusing child, but she was infinitely relieved to find that she had not antagonized him.

'You are very forbearing,' she said. 'It was no business of——' she broke off as Gervais' teasing expression gave way to a frown of annoyance. Under his breath he muttered '*Comme toujours*' and sprang to his feet. She cast a startled glance over her shoulder and saw a familiar figure approaching; the widow Bernine.

'*Bonjour, Tante.*' The frown disappeared: politely he greeted his aunt.

'*Bonjour, Gervais. Et Lora?*' Her eyes probed inquisitively as the girl got up from the grass. 'You have been showing her the ruins, my boy? And she is taking a morning off from her duties?'

'Mademoiselle is already familiar with the ruins,' Gervais said lightly. 'She wished to make a sketch of them.'

'And has done so, it appears.' Gervais was still holding the two sheets of drawing paper. 'One would be interested to see it.'

'No,' he replied, 'the picture did not materialize. I found a tribe of children here and was reading the riot act to them when Lora arrived.'

'But what have you there, then?'

'Only a few lines, patterns, by which Lora was demonstrating to me a fashionable style. They make nothing.' Casually he tore the sheets in half, tore them again and stuffed the pieces into a pocket. 'You have come to lunch, Tante? Why are you making such a detour?'

'I thought I heard voices from this direction as I approached the garden and came to see if Louise were here.'

Not you, thought Lora. You came because you thought you heard Gervais' voice and mine.

'Is it nearly lunch-time?' she said aloud. 'I must go back to the Dower House.' She now presided daily over this meal at the *pension*. Gervais made a movement, seemed about to speak, checked himself. All his native courtesy urged that he should escort her to the house, but Tante stood there like a black-draped challenge; she would be highly affronted if he walked off and left her. Lora bit back a smile at the sight of his vexed young face; without more ado she said 'Good morning, Madame, *au revoir*, Gervais,' and hurried away.

She had arrived at the château under the impression that her duties would be purely on the social side and very light ones into the bargain, but after the first week she had discovered that the countess's interpretation of the word hostess was vastly more comprehensive than her own. She proved, as well, the truth of Aunt Ella's assertion that what Louise de Beauvoir wanted, she got. Lora could hardly have told how it was done, but having been shown the ropes and satisfied Madame as to her ability she found herself, highly gratified if slightly staggered, installed as manageress of the *pension*. An ante-room was fitted up as her private office; she made a weekly report to the countess but was otherwise given full authority.

Lora kept the accounts, which were simple and straightforward enough; she did the catering, ordering poultry and vegetables and fruit from the farm, staples and meat from Ste. Anne. She attended to the correspondence, answering inquiries, determining possible dates for future arrivals. She superintended the inexperienced staff, drawn from the daughters of estate workers, who fortunately liked the English Miss and between whom and the guests she acted as interpreter and occasionally buffer. In addition, it was her business to suggest and arrange for such out-of-doors diversions as the place afforded, organize the week-end parties, and bridge or canasta tournaments to keep the women amused at other times.

She put her heart into the work, eager to make a success and please the countess. It meant that she had to spend a

great deal of time at the Dower House and her status was altered; she was no longer the attentively considered guest who assisted her hostess when required and shared the general avocations of the family; her job came first now, and while always welcome in the countess's circle she was not automatically included. It depended entirely upon whether or not her duties permitted.

She had found it advisable to have her midday meal at the *pension*, to be on hand; the American women, somewhat at sea in this alien and isolated spot, relied upon her. Dinner, however, attended by every child old enough to sit at table and served, by request, at the unholy hour of half past six, was a more flexible matter. When for any reason she felt it necessary, Lora dined and spent the evening with what she was beginning to regard as her flock but on other nights she went back to the château where her place was always laid at Madame's table.

On this particular day a number of the women had been taken by Army lorry to have lunch at the aerodrome and see what was to be seen; she had been free to go over to attempt her sketch of the ruins and, after presiding at the Dower House table with the children and one or two remaining mothers, would be free again this afternoon.

Promptly at three o'clock Gervais, wearing rope-soled sandals, dark blue slacks and loose white shirt appeared on the lawn where Lora and the little boys awaited him. Lora was also wearing blue slacks and an amber-coloured jumper, short sleeved with a deep V-neck. Her hair was tied back from her temples with a band of matching chiffon. The children were clad in a variety of styles: cowboy suits, gaudy checks, one wore a fringed Indian tunic. Gervais conducted the gaily-hued party along a bridle-path and through a cutting in the dense line of forest to the river.

Rising not far from Ste. Anne, the river meandered on the edge of various valley estates; Beauvoir, Les Chenes and the de Boncourt property among others. Its upper and lower reaches were abundantly stocked with trout and coarse fish,

but for a distance of about a mile as it passed Beauvoir it spread out into the shallowest of broad streams, rippling over and against smooth round stones.

'You see,' Gervais said to Lora, 'it is quite safe, even if the children came to play here by themselves.'

'And what a heavenly place. The sound of the water—I could listen to it for hours. Did you ever read a book called *Running Water*?'

'No. A nice title.' He smiled down at the vivid face and noted that her eyes had taken on the amber tints of her jumper and the bit of chiffon around her hair. 'Cat's eyes', he said.

'Mine?'

He nodded.

'They change colour exactly like a cat's. Can you see in the dark, Lora, and discern ghosts?'

Even as he spoke she saw something which, if not a ghost, startled her equally for a split second. A movement among the trees in the distance; a flicker of red, a gleam of gold and it was gone. Francie? She had been wearing her red shirt when Lora met her before leaving the château this morning. Well, and if it were, why should Francine not be rambling through the forest with Lucienne or some other of her friends? 'Don't be ridiculous,' Lora begged herself. Ridiculous or not, however, she said nothing to Gervais about it.

'I can see very well in the dark with my cat's eyes,' she told him, 'and I hope some day to discern a spirit. Are these the stepping-stones? Come along, boys——' She crossed the stream, the ecstatic children who with one accord had removed their plimsolls, splashing beside her.

They had their instruction in climbing the easy outcrop; they could have scrambled up, clinging to this bush and that, but Gervais was a firm taskmaster and allowed no such unorthodox method. They had come to learn rock holds and bushes were taboo. Lora was astonished by the way in which the undisciplined youngsters responded; they did what he directed them to do, over and over again until he

was satisfied. They beamed with pride when he said 'Well done.'

Presently he announced that the class was dismissed and they could now play in the stream. With undiminished energy they set themselves to building a dam; Gervais strolled over to where Lora sat on a fallen log.

'Would you like to make a little promenade?' He spoke in French, as he frequently did with her, knowing that she was anxious to seize every opportunity to practise the language. She replied that she would and they set off together along the edge of the water towards another bridle-path that led up the wooded slope.

'I regretted destroying your sketches,' he said. 'I should have liked very much to keep them. But I did not care to have Tante Angele see them and there was no other way. She is a woman of boundless curiosity and limitless persistence.'

'I am glad you did tear them up. The one of you was—an impertinence—and your mother would have disliked Francine's.'

'My mother would have seen neither of them and it would have given me pleasure to keep both.'

'I will do you two more, then. One of Francie and one of you.'

'Another—impertinence?'

'Not at all. A humble tribute to a forbearing young man.'

'*Tiens*. I do not know that I shall be so pleased with that.'

'If you aren't pleased you have only to tear it up.'

'No. Whatever you produce, I shall not again destroy it.'

She caught a little breath and felt warm colour rising in her cheeks. Fearful lest he should notice it and imagine she attached undue significance to what he had said, she retorted gaily.

'Unless Tante Angele again appears at the critical moment.'

'With that proviso, certainly. It is understood. Hallo! What have we here? The troupe descending——'

They had reached the bridle-path and saw, above them,

the four de Boncourts riding down in Indian file. Ghislaine, leading, was mounted on a magnificent bay, the other three rode small Spanish jennets, a strain which was being bred at their estate.

'They look as if they were on patrol,' Lora said.

'They look,' Gervais agreed, his tone quizzical, 'as if they were indeed. Well, Ghislaine, what comedy do you enact now?'

Ghislaine saluted them, smiling his characteristic smile with its touch of mockery and the strong white teeth set together. His bold bright eyes, clear grey in colour, glanced from Gervais to Lora and at the splashing small figures beyond.

'*Comment?* You have been impressed, my old one? Mademoiselle—*bonjour*, Miss Russell—has impressed you into service with her kindergarten? An achievement, that. It is hardly your *genre*.'

'On the contrary, I conceived the idea myself to distract their attention from my more damageable property. Mademoiselle was kind enough to come and give me her support.'

The riders halted, the three behind their leader politely greeting the English girl.

'Where are you bound?' Gervais asked. 'You look very *affairé*.'

'We are on reconnaissance. We are crossing the stream here and reconnoitring the other side.'

Gervais flung back his head and laughed.

'Commend me to a de Boncourt. Always dramatic. You lack only cloaks and daggers. What is it, this reconnaissance?'

Ghislaine grinned.

'A little drama is not amiss. It lends spice. As for our object, we have cause to believe that trout is being poached and hope to surprise the malefactors in the act.'

'That is no news. Trout is always being poached.'

'By the peasants, yes, and it is understood that one turns the blind eye. But it is said that the American soldiers are

poaching. They have been observed, one or two of them, along the banks on several occasions.'

'You cannot call this evidence. And if they do tickle a few fish——'

'A few fish! You forget how many troops are here. If they come in their hordes——'

'They won't come in hordes. The valley is out of bounds. Some do slip in, as we know, but their purpose is not fishing.'

'As for that,' one of the girls put in, 'we passed an American jeep over there——' she pointed—'standing empty where the road crosses the track.'

Lora again caught her breath. A jeep—in that direction—Lieutenant Carey? Had her instinct been right?

'Truly?' Gervais said. 'Then the enemy must lurk somewhere in the vicinity. For my part I do not think you will find him on the river bank. What is your intention if you do? Ride him down? Capture him?' The dark eyes twinkled.

'Send an official complaint.'

'Much good that will effect. The C.O. cannot do more than he has already done by placing the district out of bounds. But continue, my little ones, enjoy your innocent play.'

They seemed inclined to linger and chat for a few minutes. Armande, Ghislaine's sister, remarked that she had heard the Marsan twins as well as Lucienne Tessier had attended the house-warming dance and that both the Tessiers and the Marsans had returned the Americans' hospitality. Such gaiety; an innovation for the valley. She spoke on an accent of derision which her companions echoed but Lora shrewdly suspected that, with the exception of their leader and mentor, they would not have objected to being included in the gaiety. The situation amused her but she was sorry for the victims. What an intolerable autocrat Ghislaine was.

The small boys, intent on their dam, now caught sight of the horses and came running to inspect them.

'My faith,' Ghislaine cried, 'is this how Americans clothe their unfortunate infants? One would say a travelling show.'

Lora, forgetting that the children could not understand, sent him an indignant look which he met with a cool, level one, indicating that Miss Russell's disapproval left him unmoved.

The elder boys were keeping prudently clear of the horses' hooves, but a seven-year-old edged closer, gazing fascinated at the tall bay that towered above him. He stretched out a hand; Lora said sharply, 'Don't do that, Billy.' The bay stood quietly; Ghislaine leaned from the saddle.

'Hand him up, Gervais.'

Billy, enraptured, was lifted up in front of the rider who, signalling his troupe to follow, cantered along the bank to a bend of the stream where the water deepened a little and a bed of firm shingle provided a ford. They crossed over and returned along the other bank to the cutting in the fringing woods; then Ghislaine swung the child to the ground with a '*Va t'en, mon brave,*' and the cavalcade wheeled into the cutting and disappeared.

The boy came prancing back across the stepping-stones.

'See me ride right through the water, Miss Russell?'

'I saw you,' she smiled.

'He's a swell guy, isn't he?'

'He appears to—have his points.'

The incident, trifling as it was, had given her a curious little shock. She had felt the full force of Ghislaine's undeniable charm; the gay, mocking, ruthless young man stooping to please the child, knowing exactly what would thrill a child most; 'riding through the water'.

She thought better of him now, but she owed him a fresh grudge. His advent with his followers had interrupted that solitary walk during which she and Gervais had seemed on the verge of an intimacy they had not before attained. There had been a warmth, something even like affection in his tone when he declared that he would never again destroy what she had created. She had quickly returned her laughing reply and he had laughed too, but it had been a magical

moment none the less; then the magic had dissolved in face of those invading others. It was not to be recaptured; Gervais, turning to her, said smilingly:

‘So much for that. I do not believe they will catch their quarry but the pleasure is in the chase. Play-actors; they will mature some day. Enlivening youngsters, aren’t they?’

She felt a jealous pang; his interest had been deflected from herself to them.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘that it is time to take the small fry back to the Dower House. They have been paddling long enough and are probably soaked to the skin.’

He agreed at once—she had half hoped he would protest—and they collected the boys and made their way back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When they reached the Dower House the children thanked 'Monsoor' for a swell time. 'Can we go and play there every day?'

'That,' Gervais assured them solemnly, 'was my object in introducing you to the river.'

They raced indoors, eager to recount their exploits; to Lora he said:

'Shall we be seeing you at the château this evening?'

'For dinner? Yes, unless I find I am needed here.'

'Needed here! You are too conscientious. A lot of grown women; surely they can look after themselves?'

'They get at loose ends sometimes. They are used to having amusements laid on; cinemas and television and so forth. They need direction, like their children.'

'Well, let us hope that they will manage to direct themselves for once. *À bientôt*——'

He strode away and she followed the boys into the house, the depression that had settled upon her considerably lifted. She waited until the party from the aerodrome returned and listened sympathetically to what they had to tell of the wonders being done there; the miles of land cleared and levelled, the vast runways marked out, buildings going up.

'You must see it, Lora, and the countess's son ought to see it. You wouldn't believe—whole forests and quite big hills utterly vanished——'

Lora showed herself suitably impressed and refrained from saying that she thought it a tragedy, necessary though it was, and that the sight was not likely to give the countess's son much joy. She escaped at last and hurried across to the château and up to her bedroom. From an adjoining room came the sound of a young, teasing voice and an old one, grumbling, on an undernote of adoration. Nanon and

Francine. In the stress of more recent matters Lora had forgotten that apparition in the distant woods.

'I am sure it was Francie,' she said to herself now, 'and the jeep being there does look as if—can it have gone so far as this, already?'

During the time that had elapsed since the dance at the Dower House Francine and Lieutenant Carey had met officially only twice; at the Marsans' tennis party and the Tessiers' cocktail party, both meetings taking place in the midst of a crowd with Francie under the brotherly if unsuspecting eye of Gervais. But young people mutually attracted have their own means of communication—'I'll try to discover what is going on,' decided Lora.

Meantime, it behoved her to make herself presentable for dinner; she did so and went down to join the others in the salon. Lucienne Tessier was there, having driven over to dine with them. Whenever and wherever Lucienne appeared, laughter and chatter and a general buoyancy of atmosphere ensued. Tonight she had sundry bits of news to relate, then wanted to hear what the others had been doing since last she saw them. Lora, infected by her animation, described the scene she had witnessed between Gervais and the small boys and the subsequent expedition; Gervais gave them a spirited account of the cloak and dagger party. Apropos of this, Lora advanced her theory that the three younger de Boncourts would not be averse to joining in the new social activities and Lucienne declared that in her view it was only a matter of time before they succumbed.

'Ghislaine will prevent them,' Francine said. 'He holds them on a leash, that one, and himself will never succumb.'

'Even Ghislaine must bow to higher authority,' Madame la Comtesse smiled. 'And when they find that many of us are accepting and entertaining the Americans, I fancy the two Messieurs, Ghislaine's father and uncle, will feel it incumbent upon them at least to make a gesture. After all, they are the leading family and own the largest property in the district.'

'*Noblesse oblige?*' Lora suggested.

'Noblesse oblige. Les Messieurs sont très correct.'

And evidently take themselves very pompously, thought Lora, which might explain the bearing of one of the sons. Not that Ghislaine was as yet pompous, he was too young and spirited, but she could imagine him crystallizing into a pretentious and inflated man.

The evening passed agreeably; at ten o'clock Gervais drove Lucienne home in her own car and the others retired to their rooms.

Lora sat down to finish a letter to Aunt Ella in London; she was putting it into an envelope when Nanon appeared with the steaming *tisane* that was a nightly ritual at the château. Nanon and Lora were now on the best and cosiest of terms, the old nurse treating the English girl much as she did Francine. While Lora sipped the bitter brew for which she was acquiring a taste, the other would potter around the bedroom; closing the windows against the sweet warm air, tidying the dressing-table, picking up a pair of stockings or wisp of underwear which, with the personal linen of the other members of the family she insisted upon laundering herself, gossiping companionably of this and that. From the chatter at the dinner table this evening Nanon, who always superintended the serving of the meal, had gathered something of the afternoon's adventures; was it indeed true, she asked, that Monsieur Gervais had given up all those hours in order to amuse the American children? Lora replied that it was, and told her about the climbing lesson and of how the troupe had appeared and Monsieur Ghislaine had given the tiniest child a ride on his beautiful big horse. 'The last thing I would have expected of him,' she said.

'He is a good boy,' Nanon pronounced. 'He has his faults, like another, but he will make a fine man. The little one is in luck, although she lacks the sense to realize it.'

'Francie? You mean she—and he—I guessed there was something of that sort from what I heard Madame de Bernine say on one occasion. But no one has spoken of it since—perhaps I ought not to ask you—'

'It is no secret, mademoiselle. Everyone knows that

Monsieur Ghislaine's parents have made a *démarche* on his behalf to Madame la Comtesse who views the proposal favourably. Monsieur Gervais also favours it although he will not have the child hurried; he says that eighteen years is time enough for her to become affianced, and she is only seventeen.'

'But Francie detests Ghislaine,' Lora exclaimed impulsively. 'She will never consent.'

'As for that, she will accede to the wishes and the counsel of her guardian and stepmother like a well brought up young girl.'

'They will insist? Force her?'

'Monsieur will not insist. But they will both exert their influence; the little one cannot stand against them.'

'What about Ghislaine? Is he in love with her? And does he want an unwilling wife?'

'He knows that his parents have approached Madame, and is evidently content. He has known Francine since her babyhood and has always made something of a pet of her. *Du reste*, naturally at this stage, he does not address himself to her directly; that would be most improper. As for her, she will see reason and consent in the end. A truly excellent alliance; better, perhaps, than she has a right to expect.'

'I should think,' Lora expostulated, 'that the daughter of the Comte d'Anely de Vaucours is fully the equal of a de Boncourt.'

'Ah. But she is not only the daughter of the Comte, mademoiselle.'

'Who was her mother, Nanon?'

'Madame has not told you?'

'No. I gathered, again from Madame de Bernine, that there had been no love lost between her and Francie's mother. She has implied that Francie may inherit tendencies—I could not help putting two and two together. Madame de Bernine said these things quite openly before me as if it were common knowledge.'

'So it is, although only the widow, in her malice, refuses to let the old story rest. There can be no harm in my

repeating it to you; it will go better, I think, for then you will not ask any embarrassing questions as, in all innocence, you might easily do.'

Monsieur le Comte, she explained, had been a gentle, retiring man, dominated by his mother and his sister Angele. He had shown no inclination to marry and his parents, having made several attempts to *ranger* him, had accepted the fact of his confirmed bachelorhood. Then, at an age which, observed Nanon sapiently, is dangerous for any man, married or single, during a visit to Paris he had fallen violently in love with a little dancer; not a dancer of repute, which to his parents would have been shocking enough, but an obscure performer in some Montparnasse cabaret.

'It goes without saying, mademoiselle, that in the beginning Monsieur le Comte had no intention of bestowing his ancient name upon this waif of the Paris cafés; *ça ne se fait pas*. Nevertheless, he presently married her and in due course Francine was born. It is obvious that, either by accident or by design on the dancer's part, she became *enceinte* and Monsieur, a man of high ideals and strict religious code did not hesitate to take this step for the sake of the unborn child.'

There had been a great *scandale* in the valley; Monsieur's ageing parents forbade him to bring his wife and baby to the estate. Angele had been particularly enraged; if she cared for anyone in the world it was her brother and her affection for him was possessive and jealous. Although she never once set eyes upon the wife she conceived for her a virulent hatred. A year or two after Francine was born the young mother reverted to type and ran off with some man of her own class; Monsieur's religion forbade divorce, but most conveniently she died shortly afterwards.

'As I have already told you,' Nanon concluded, 'by this time Monsieur's parents were dead and his sister, widowed, had returned to her old home. Monsieur returned also, with the child, and not long afterwards married my mistress, much to the annoyance of the widow who had hoped to have him to herself and dominate the little one as she dominated him.'

‘What a blessing for Francie that he did marry the countess, Nanon.’

‘You speak the truth, mademoiselle. My mistress has been a devoted mother to her and loves her dearly. Monsieur Gervais as well; from the first she has been his pet and treasure. It is only *la veuve* who cannot forgive Francine her existence. She resents, too, having no control over her niece’s inheritance. But I have talked enough; too much, perhaps.’

‘No, you have only confirmed my own vague impressions. I am forewarned now and will not make any blunders.’

‘And mademoiselle understands why Madame la Comtesse and Monsieur Gervais find this proposal of marriage gratifying? It is not every family of such importance as the de Boncourts who could overlook the fact that Francine’s mother was—what she was.’

Lora privately considered that any family who could hold the unfortunate reputation of her mother against an innocent and lovely young girl, deserved boiling in oil. She accorded no palms to the de Boncourts for what, to these others, appeared their magnanimity. But she did not argue the point with the old servant.

‘I understand,’ she said.

‘*Bon.* And now I will say good night, mademoiselle. Sleep well.’

When Nanon had gone, Lora opened the windows behind their flowered curtains and proceeded to undress, putting on a nightgown of peach-coloured nylon, a highly becoming garment with its square low neckline, tiny sleeves and full skirt tied at the waist by a narrow sash. She was standing before the mirror brushing her hair when she heard and recognized a soft tap on the door.

‘Francie? Come in, poppet.’

Francine was also in her nightgown, a voluminous affair very different from Lora’s. It was made of thick white cotton, buttoning to the throat with a little starched, up-standing frill; the sleeves extended to her wrists where they caught into a cuff and finished with matching frills. She cast

a longing look at the sheer nylon, wishing she dared send for something of the same sort to the shop from which she had procured her slacks; but maman, who had indulgently allowed the latter, would never permit her stepdaughter to wear nightgowns like this. Not yet, at any rate. Perhaps when she was eighteen . . .

'I hope I do not disturb you, Lora,' she said politely. 'I wasn't sleepy, and I heard you moving and thought I'd come in for a few minutes.'

'I am glad you came. Curl up on the bed while I finish my hair.'

Francine curled herself at the foot of the bed and Lora went on brushing the soft dark waves, pressing them into shape and securing them with curved combs.

The younger girl played with her own fingers for a moment, then said:

'Did you see me this afternoon, Lora? I saw you and you seemed to be looking straight towards me——'

'It *was* you, then?' Lora spoke in a casual tone, very busy with a refractory strand of hair. 'As a matter of fact I did catch a glimpse of what looked like your red shirt, but it was so far away——'

'Did Gervais see me too?'

'No. And I didn't mention it. I thought I was probably mistaken and did not give it another thought. What were you doing in the forest?'

'Just walking. Whom do you think I met?'

'I can't imagine,' replied Lora, who not only could imagine but now knew.

'Lieutenant Carey.'

'Lieutenant Carey? What was he doing there?'

'It is said that some of the private soldiers are poaching trout and he drove out to see if he could find some of them.'

'I see. Everyone seems to have been imbued with the same idea today. Did Mr. Carey succeed?'

'I don't know. He had not discovered anyone when I met him. We had a little talk; he told me about his home. It is an estate like Beauvoir but with cotton instead of vines. He

showed me a picture of the house; it is not at all like the château, but it's very beautiful.'

'Yes, I know. Mrs. Howard told me about it, her home is only a few miles from the Careys.'

Francine fiddled with her fingers again.

'It—it isn't necessary to say anything to maman or Gervais about my having met him today, Lora. You will not do so?'

'Of course I won't. It's none of my business. Not that there was anything out of the way in your chancing to meet him. Why not tell them yourself?'

'I'd rather not. You know their ideas, so old-fashioned, they might say I wasn't to go to the woods alone again. Especially now that the private soldiers are supposed to be coming along the river.'

'Well,' Lora returned lightly, 'it might be as well if you didn't go rambling too far afield by yourself, poppet.'

'I probably won't go again. I just hadn't anything to do today. But I don't want a lot of fuss——'

'All right, Francie. I certainly shan't say anything.'

'Thank you.' Francine slipped off the bed. 'I knew you wouldn't, it was unnecessary to ask. I must go now and let you get to sleep.'

She went softly away; Lora sighed and smiled as the door closed behind the little nun-like figure. She knew what had prompted Francie. Had the child spoken the truth, in the tale she had hastened to tell of the chance meeting?

It could be, of course, that Francie had been seized by a desire to ramble off into the woods by herself—which was not her usual habit—and that Lieutenant Carey might have decided to look for the poachers at a most unlikely hour and had left his jeep to conduct his search along the confines of the de Beauvoir property where the water was so shallow that no one ever fished there. It *could* be—— 'And the moon could be made of green cheese,' thought Lora grimly.

But she was not unduly perturbed, startling though it was to discover that these two were meeting by appointment. Having noted in the beginning that the young man

was very much attracted by Francie and suspecting the attraction to be mutual, Lora had made it her business discreetly to inquire of the Colonel's wife concerning the status and character of the lieutenant. Mrs. Howard, happily, was in a position to give her full information. She came from Louisiana which was Donald Carey's home state and knew his people intimately; a fine family with a lovely old place and plenty of money. Don, she declared, was a grand person; steady, unspoilt, a devoted son and one of the most trustworthy subalterns in her husband's Command. Any girl who got Don could count herself mighty lucky.

Lora had been reassured. The youth's credentials were entirely satisfactory; she had seen for herself that he was gentle and, she felt sure, considerate; in her opinion he offered a far happier prospect for darling little Francie than the autocratic and insensitive Ghislaine de Boncourt. This opinion, however, must be kept to herself. Francine's affairs were the province of her guardian and stepmother; Lora, a guest in their house, would be making an unforgivable return if she attempted to interfere in any way.

As for meeting each other in secret, Francie was asking for trouble if she continued to do so and were found out, but nothing Lora could say to her would stop it if she were determined to take the risk. One might as well remonstrate with the whirlwind as a girl in the first ecstatic stages of falling in love. Besides, she had admitted nothing and there was as yet no justification for remonstrance. Even if there were, it was not for Lora to take the younger girl to task, it was no affair of Lora's and Francine would be quite justified in requesting her to mind her own business.

'If Donald Carey were not what he is, if he were wild and irresponsible like so many of the others, if Francie were in any kind of danger, it would be a different matter. But he isn't, and she isn't. So far as I am concerned, matters will just have to take their course.'

She turned off the lights, drew back the curtains from the window overlooking the courtyard and knelt down, her crossed arms on the sill, as she had done on that first evening

when, as tonight, Gervais had driven Lucienne home, to return on foot. He was not yet back, he must have gone in for a chat and a nightcap at Les Chenes.

The valley lay warm and windless under the lightly overcast night sky so typical of this region. She gazed dreamily out and her thoughts slid away from the minor problem of Francine's affairs; she had other and nearer considerations to engross her.

She recalled and relived that hour with Gervais in the shadow of the ruined gateway. His discovery of her, his kindly pretence of interest in her art, the sketch of his step-sister and his abrupt, astonishing question. She understood now why he had asked it; he supposed that she had heard the story of the dancer-mother. A surge of indignation swelled in Lora's breast.

'To believe that of me—how could he think I would do so malicious and uncalled-for a thing? How *could* he?'

Then she caught a sharp little breath. She had done exactly this, or the same sort of thing, with her second sketch. Malicious, yes. Uncalled-for indeed. Impertinent.

Why had she done it? What obscure impulse lay behind it? To show him what she thought of his repudiation of his birthright—that, of course. But there was something more; a feeling, youthfully censorious—and very British—that in choosing Beauvoir he had set his feet upon too flowery a path.

Not for him the challenging struggle, the restrictions, frustrations and all the other crippling difficulties with which young men such as he were grappling in England. He had lived effortlessly, snugly, heir to an estate which, if it would never bring riches, meant a most comfortable living. He submitted willingly to the dictates of his mother and, to a lesser degree, the naggings of his aunt, both of whom, none the less, accorded him the respect due to the man of the family, by courtesy head of the household. Adored by Nanon, worshipped and a little feared by Francine; surrounded by women; a featherbed existence in this remote valley where, according to Lora's travelling companion, even the

war and the final occupation had caused scarcely a ripple on the smooth surface.

'Well, so what?' Lora asked herself at this point. At least it had not spoiled or softened him. There was nothing soft or effeminate about Gervais—she laughed briefly. He was anything but that. Then what was she grizzling about? Why this feeling, which still persisted, of something lacking?

Oddly enough, Lora received an answer to her vexing question on the following day. As she was leaving for the Dower House next morning Madame la Comtesse arrested her in the hall.

'Have you any engagement with the American ladies this afternoon, Lora?'

'No, Madame.'

'Then perhaps you would like—Clotilde Marsan has just telephoned. They have an English guest, a retired Major, staying with them and Clotilde desires Gervais and myself to go over and *goûter* at four o'clock. She suggested my bringing you with us, as it will no doubt please you to meet a compatriot.'

'How kind of Madame Marsan. I should like very much to go.'

'*Bon*. We shall leave here about a quarter to four. It is not a party, you understand, only ourselves are asked.'

Promptly at a quarter to four, Lora, wearing a crisp little frock of shadow-checked cotton in shades of green and amber, its row of amber crystal buttons and wide, turned down collar edged with minute pleats, came out to the courtyard where Gervais stood by the car. He smiled approval at sight of her.

'Mademoiselle is looking very chic.'

'It is nice of you to say so.'

'But she has confronted her cat's eyes with a problem. They will not know which of these two colours to reflect.'

'Perhaps,' she laughed, 'they will be content, today, to remain plain ordinary hazel.'

‘A mixture of each, in effect. But I should not say either plain or ordinary.’

The countess came out and they got into the car, Gervais taking the wheel. As they drove away he asked his mother who this English guest was that they were invited to meet. She replied that he was a retired regular Army officer who now had a controlling interest in a wine importing firm with whom, some months ago, the Château Marsan had concluded a shipping contract. Having come to Biarritz for a short holiday he had dropped a line to Monsieur Marsan asking if he might drive over and have a look at the vines; the journey was not excessively long and there were good roads. Monsieur had hospitably urged that he should spend a couple of nights with them and see something of the district, and this the Englishman had gladly agreed to do. They had never met him until this visit; Clotilde reported him as *très gentil, bien sympathique*.

Monsieur and Madame Marsan with their guest—the twins and Henri were not in evidence—awaited them in the salon. Monsieur, small, bright-eyed, energetic, bustled forward to greet them; Madame rose from behind a round table laden with cakes and a silver coffee service. Like the majority of the big wine growers in this section they spoke a certain amount of English, as did the young people.

Monsieur shook hands with the arrivals, the elder ladies embraced, the Englishman, tall, lean, grey-haired, was presented to the countess and Lora. Then Monsieur Marsan said with a flourish:

‘And now, Major Mansfield, I have the great pleasure to present to you *Numéro Quatre*. Gervais de Beauvoir.’

‘*Numéro Quatre*. No! My dear chap,’ the Major warmly grasped Gervais’ hand. ‘I had no idea of this, Marsan did not give me an inkling——’

‘Ah,’ their host chuckled. ‘I said nothing to either of you. I wished to confer the pleasing surprise.’

‘You have succeeded admirably, in my case. Nothing could have pleased and surprised me more. *Numéro Quatre*.

That astounding boy—to whom I owe my continued existence——’

‘And you, Gervais?’ Monsieur interposed. ‘Have you guessed who this is? Do you recall a day of gale and snow and a man lying unconscious, freezing, the light waning, dusk approaching——’

‘I have guessed,’ Gervais smiled. ‘I am very glad to see you again, sir, and find you in better shape than when we last met. You made it, then? I have often wondered how you got on.’

Madame Marsan said:

‘Seat yourselves, my friends, the coffee will become cold otherwise. While you drink it Monsieur le Commandant will tell the story of this so happy coincidence.’

She filled the cups, her husband distributed them and passed the *petits fours*.

‘A coincidence, in truth,’ he said when everyone’s wants had been supplied. ‘Listen, then——’

It appeared that Major Mansfield had been one of the British officers to take the escape route to Spain across the Pyrenees. He had been imprisoned for two years, was in poor condition and already exhausted by the gruelling trek in bitter winter weather when he and a companion and their guide approached the rendezvous where they were to be handed over to a fresh contact. There had been an alarm, false as it afterwards proved, and the three men had scattered to lie low. A sudden blizzard had sprung up and the Major had been unable to find the track again or any sign of his fellow travellers.

He had wandered in circles, as people do in blizzards, groping his way, aware that at any moment he might crash into some hidden gully. At length, half frozen, baffled and blinded by the stinging flakes borne on the vicious wind, he had stumbled and fallen heavily in an unsuspected hollow concealed by a drift of snow. Shaken and stunned by the fall, he shirked the effort of dragging himself up and continuing his aimless wandering; in his bemused state it did not seem worth while.

'The next thing I knew,' he continued, 'was finding myself in some sort of hut and a youngster—he didn't look more than sixteen—slapping and rubbing me and trying to force brandy between my teeth. I asked the boy—I speak a modicum of French—how the devil he had got me there and who he was. He replied that it had not been difficult—'*Je suis bien fort, Monsieur,*' I remember his saying very proudly—and that he was *Numéro Quatre*, my contact. He had met the others at the rendezvous, supposing that I was following in the rear; when I failed to put in an appearance he had come to comb the place for me.'

'And by a stroke of sheer luck, found you,' Gervais said, 'not far from the charcoal burner's hut.'

'A bit more than luck, I think,' the Major responded. 'To search that dangerous terrain in a howling gale and solid wall of snow——'

'As for that, I knew the place like the back of my hand.'

Lora had been sitting tense throughout the recital, her coffee and cakes forgotten.

'It was *Gervais*—who found Major Mansfield?' she demanded.

'Gervais and none other,' Monsieur Marsan beamed. 'Operating under my orders in a section of which he knew every yard, having ridden and climbed and camped there with other boys since the age of twelve. And when Major Mansfield recounted his experience to me last evening I kept my own counsel and concealed my surprise.'

Lora had her answer. Once again she was abashed but her heart was in a glow.

She had no chance to speak what she felt during the remainder of the visit and the short drive back to the château. As they drove into the courtyard Nanon, agitated, came out to meet them. She was at odds with one of the maids, a not infrequent occurrence.

'*Cette p'tite espèce d'idiot*——' would Madame enter at once and see what she had done?

Madame, mildly replying that it was naturally her

intention to enter, did so; Lora stood hesitantly by the car from which Gervais had handed her.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'it was rather a boring afternoon for you. When two or three veterans get together——'

'I wasn't bored,' she said quickly. Her heart was still glowing, her eyes alight. 'So you were in the Resistance, Gervais?' And added, her happy spirits bubbling over, '*Il ne manquait que ça.*'

'It only needed that?' he echoed, in English. He gave her one of his quizzical, inquiring looks. 'Are you—getting at me—again, Lora?'

'Getting at you! No. Why should you say that?'

'Because I joined the French Underground. I wondered if, in view of your feeling towards my—expatriation—you were indulging in a little malice at my expense. I was only fourteen when the war broke out so there was no question of my returning to England and enlisting in, for instance, my father's old regiment.'

'I know that! You thought I was making fun—what a horrible idea. I only meant—I didn't express it very brightly—that I had heard nothing of this. No one has mentioned it and I imagined that people down here hadn't been involved in the Movement. To find that you——' she flushed a little and went on hurriedly, 'Monsieur Marsan, too, whom I had looked upon as just a nice, funny, fussy little soul—so much for prejudging,' she finished gaily.

Still with that quizzical, teasing expression he said:

'I have advanced one more step in your estimation, then? This is encouraging. I begin to hope that I may eventually rise to Miss Russell's standard.'

Her colour deepened.

'Gervais—I have been silly and stupid. It would serve me right if you never spoke to me again.'

'Do you imagine that would give me any satisfaction?'

'It ought to. I should think you would detest me.'

'Detest you. What next.' He made a movement as if about to touch her hair or her shamed, burning cheek. If such had been his intention, he thought better of it. 'How

absurd you are, Lora. Almost as absurd as you are sweet.' And then, smiling, 'I must put the car away.'

'And I must go in.'

She ran in and up the staircase, her fast-beating heart keeping time to the words ringing through her brain. *Absurd as you are sweet.*

As she closed her door someone else came up on flying feet, another door closed and then came the sound of Francine singing as she moved lightly about her bedroom. Familiar sound; she was always singing in her soft small voice as she went about her avocations in house and garden; old nursery rhymes, traditional *chansonnettes* or, what she preferred, the latest popular hits transmitted by Radio Paris. French songs, for the most part; but she wasn't singing in French this evening. Lora recognized the lyric—she had seen the musical comedy in London—the younger girl had no doubt heard some of the numbers on the American Forces programme.

'I'm in love with a wonderful guy——'

Lora shook her head. Francie—Francie—then she put her hands up to her face which was suddenly burning again.

'So am I. Oh, so am I.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

'I'm in love with Gervais,' Lora said aloud on a shaken breath.

And he? No, she must not be so mad as to hope that Gervais felt as she did. He liked her, he had told her she was sweet, but that was a far cry from being in love with her.

Why should he be? A girl he had known only for a few short weeks and with whom his contacts had been of the briefest. Yesterday was the very first time he and she had been alone in each other's company for more than five or ten minutes. He scarcely knew her at all.

Her own case was different. The curious story attached to him had aroused her interest from the start; she closely observed him, puzzled about him, endeavouring to reconcile her preconceived and disapproving image of Louise de Beauvoir's English son with the baffling young man himself. Daily he had loomed larger upon her horizon, overshadowing everyone else. Oh, yes, her case was different.

'But he's never given me a second thought. Or—*has* he?'

Men had been known to fall in love within the space of a few weeks—or days. What about young Carey and that child trilling her song in the adjoining bedroom? Lora's pulses suddenly thrummed again and sharp little thrills ran along her nerves. She exhorted herself to stop thinking about it, but she went on thinking about it, hugging it to her breast. Gervais—Gervais——

She heard Francine leave her room and at last came down to earth. Time to cease this nonsense and change her frock for dinner. Not that dinner would be served for another three quarters of an hour, but Madame la Comtesse liked the family to assemble in the salon well beforehand to drink a vermouth and talk over the events of the day. She was a

very busy woman and held all the strings of the establishment firmly in her hands. Nothing was done on the estate without her approval, no detail was too small for her consideration. Even her son, whose suggestions she seldom, if ever, vetoed, had to submit every proposition to her. With all this to engage her, and the necessary business connected with certain industrial investments, her days were full ones; and her favourite hour, her first moment of relaxation was the pleasant *apéritif* interval.

Lora changed into her green evening jumper and ballet-length skirt and hurried downstairs. As she reached the hall she was swept by an unwonted wave of shyness at the prospect of facing Gervais. How silly—she was behaving like a callow schoolgirl—‘Pull yourself together,’ she urged. Then, with relief, she heard a medley of voices from the salon; Tante Angele was there, and one of the family discussions in full spate. ‘They won’t take any notice of *me*,’ thought Lora, who had had experience of these conclaves.

She slipped quietly into the room with a murmured ‘Good evening’, and took her accustomed chair. Gervais, polite, but obviously preoccupied, brought her a glass of Dubonnet and resumed his place on the settee beside his stepsister.

‘Yes,’ the countess was saying, ‘it is indeed short notice, but at least everyone knew that it was to take place before long. Francine, of course, will ride pillion with Ghislaine; already he has telephoned to say he will be happy to take her.’

Are they having a horse show or something, Lora wondered. Francie, she knew, was no rider, it had not been born in her as it had in so many of the girls down here.

‘I don’t want to ride pillion with Ghislaine, maman.’

‘Don’t be *ennuyante*, my child. You have always ridden with him. Every time there has been any sort of excursion on horseback. It is understood.’

‘I know, but now I wish to change. I want to ride with Gervais.’

'You cannot come with me, for the simple reason that Colombe, as you are quite aware, will not tolerate a pillion rider.'

'Why must it be Colombe, then? You could borrow a mount from Bellegarde, Monsieur de Boncourt would willingly lend you one.'

'*Ab, par exemple!* Borrow from Bellegarde! It is truly an idea, that.'

'They have plenty of horses.'

'And I am to forego Colombe, whose equal is not to be found in the district, I am to amble along on whatever animal is left at Bellegarde when all the family is accommodated? Small imbecile that you are, Francine.'

Madame la Comtesse said slyly:

'Perhaps you would prefer to come in the car with me, *chérie*? It seems a pity for you not to join the others, but as you will.'

Francine looked appalled, as if this alternative had not occurred to her.

'I don't want to go in the car—besides, I am one of the bridesmaids.'

'Then you'll go with Ghislaine,' Gervais put in decisively, 'and let us have no more arguments.'

'Very well, Gervais.'

'It is better luck than you deserve, Francine,' Tante said, 'to sit behind the finest horseman in the valley.'

'He is no better than Gervais.'

'Yes, he is,' her stepbrother said. 'I am under no illusions as to that. And he's the only man, other than myself, to whom I would trust you. No matter what the noise and the crowd, neither of which Fureur enjoys, you will be safe.'

He glanced at Lora, met her mystified look and said:

'We are speaking of a wedding which is to take place very hurriedly because the bridegroom has been offered an excellent post abroad. It is necessary for him to leave almost immediately.'

'I grasped that it was a wedding, but why on horseback?'

'It is traditional, although seldom followed nowadays. In this case the bride, Alice Levesque, is an accomplished horsewoman who has won international trophies. So she is being married in character.'

'Will everyone be mounted?'

'By no means. The bridal party, including Francie and myself, will ride, and anyone else who cares to do so. Some of the guests have a long way to come, it would not be practicable for them. But I think we shall muster a fine company all the same.'

He spoke with animation, obviously looking forward to the event. Lora felt a pang of jealousy, the impersonal jealousy of the outsider. She had no part in this affair, she had met neither the bride nor bridegroom and her position as manageress of the *pension* was not that of a guest who *ipso facto* accompanies her hostess. Above the involuntary feeling of hurt and neglect she said, with a show of cordial interest:

'It sounds like a Spanish fiesta. Francie riding pillion and, I suppose, other girls as well—I should like to see it.'

'As for that,' the countess said, 'it will be no more than a procession of riders to and from the church. But picturesque in its way and it might perhaps amuse the American women.'

'I am sure it would. They enjoy seeing local customs.'

'Then why not speak to Mrs. Howard—the Colonel could arrange transport—I suggest you make it a picnic occasion. They were pleased with the former picnic you arranged and this would be one with a definite object.'

'What a good idea. Where is the wedding being held, and when?'

The countess replied that it was to take place on the next day but one, at three o'clock. The religious ceremony would be held in what was called the Smugglers' Church, a small ancient edifice built upon an eminence from which a narrow cobbled road led down to a village on the fringe of the Levesque property.

During dinner nothing was talked of save the impending festivity. Francie entered eagerly into it all. The short

notice gave no time for special bridesmaids' dresses, and after dinner she insisted upon dragging Nanon upstairs to look over her frocks, the old nurse protesting that this could well wait until the morning. The others returned to the salon, the two elder ladies still avidly pursuing the topic. Gervais sat down at a little distance from them beside Lora, who said amusedly:

'Francie is so excited she has quite forgotten her objection to going with Ghislaine.'

'Oh—for that—the young lady was merely treating us to an exhibition of temperament. She has adopted this attitude—she's at a difficult age—I daresay you have heard, Lora, what we hope eventually to see between those two?'

'I have heard, yes. But I gather that Francie is opposed to the idea.'

'Francie is only seventeen, and in many ways undeveloped for her years. Convent bred; she only left the convent six months ago. She isn't ready to consider marriage and shrinks from the thought of Ghislaine—or any other man. In effect, the little one is too young, she shys away from the subject like a startled fawn. That is why I will not have her hurried; in a year's time she will have outgrown this childishness.'

'I see,' Lora responded, faintly. Francine too young for love! He little knew. . . .

'But don't you think,' she ventured, 'there is more to it than childish nervousness? Francie seems actually to dislike Ghislaine, she never has a good word for him. I know it isn't my business, but since she does feel like that, why force her?'

'I shall never force her. I hope—I desire it very much—I shall certainly do my best to persuade her.' Gervais spoke crisply as if he agreed that it was not Lora's business and were putting her in her place, as he so frequently put his stepsister. But Lora was not Francine, meekly to submit. With a touch of asperity she said:

'I fail to see why, in the circumstances.'

'Why? Because I want to see her *rangée*, secure. This

contemplated marriage offers everything my mother and I ask for her.'

'You want her to marry a man she doesn't love?'

A shade of impatience crossed his face.

'You take the English view, Lora. In France, as you know, the question of being in love before marriage is of less consequence. Naturally, all else being equal, it is to be preferred, but the important factor is to find someone to whom we can safely and happily confide Francine. My mother and I are the best judges in this case.'

'Madame la Comtesse married for love,' Lora said impulsively.

'*Touché*. She did. And you are thinking that her attitude now is inconsistent?'

'I don't say that. I would not dream of criticizing the countess. But I had rather thought that things were changing in France, that young people were being allowed to choose for themselves——'

'Things have not changed for girls of Francine's standing. There are exceptions, of course, but in general the marriages are the affair of the families. As for love—there is a saying that it arrives with marriage itself.' He smiled, the dark eyes rallying her. 'Come, Lora. Can you imagine any girl married to so gay and good-looking and vital a young man as Ghislaine de Boncourt, not falling in love with him?'

She was tempted to say she could easily imagine it and did not share his enthusiasm for that young man. But there was nothing to be gained by making acid remarks about someone who was not only his friend and kinsman, but to whom he hoped to marry Francine. She said, instead:

'You are very fond of him, aren't you?'

'I am fond of them all. We——' at this point he was called to the telephone and came back to make his excuses. One of the other groomsman wanted him to drive over and discuss certain arrangements. He departed; and Lora, wishing the wedding and everything connected with it at the bottom of the sea, was left to the company of Madame la Comtesse and Tante Angele.

She was awakened next morning by the sound of his voice below her window. He was off again on the same business, meeting some of his friends at the church to help with the decorations and attend to various other matters. It would take most of the day, she heard him telling his mother, and so he would dine at Bellegarde.

And I, thought Lora, won't see you at all today. Bother Alice Levesque and her traditional procession.

'This is great fun,' Mrs. Howard was saying, 'I am so glad you thought of it, Lora.'

The American contingent were grouped in a strategic position at one side of the village square from which they had a view of the church above and the road leading in from the valley. The ladies had been pleased with the idea of the outing and a glimpse of the wedding, Colonel Howard had obligingly furnished transport, and three of his officers, including Lieutenant Carey, had joined the party. The children had been left at home, under the eye of a mother whose child was too young to be left alone.

The little *place* presented a festive appearance, garlanded with flags and green branches; villagers and country people milled to and fro. Cars were already parked across the way and others arriving, their occupants descending and gingerly walking up the cobbled track. Lora saw the elder Marsans, and the Tessiers, waved to Lucienne who was not riding. Then came the de Beauvoir car; Lora waved again as the stately woman in trim black relieved by touches of white and small white toque descended.

'That's a stylish-lookin' lady,' Donald Carey said, strolling to Lora's side. 'Who is she?'

'The countess, Francine's stepmother. You have met her——'

'Sure, but I didn't recognize her for a minute. She looks all of a countess, doesn't she, today.'

Lora smilingly agreed. Her eyes approved him as he stood beside her, slim and graceful, with the slightly theatrical, indisputably glamorous aspect that handsome

young Americans so often present in uniform. One could not wonder at Francie. . . .

'Oh, look, they're beginning to come,' someone cried. A local band composed of ten men was assembling and the first of the riders converging upon the square. Ghislaine rode in on his big bay, Fureur, Francine behind him. Suzette Marsan, riding alone; her sister Therese on pillion with Henri. More and more appeared; Lora was entranced by the colourful scene.

The six bridesmaids all sat pillion and were in bright summery dresses and gay little hats. Their escorts, and a number of the other men sported grey jackets cut like mess jackets, double-breasted waistcoats, white shirts with stocks and hard, flat-brimmed, Spanish-looking hats.

Ghislaine caught sight of Lora and, to her surprise, rode over. Francine was in forget-me-not blue, a full-skirted frock with a gathered bodice tied on her breast with velvet ribbon; her arms were bare below puffed sleeves; a tiny straw 'sailor' with long streamers was on her silver-gilt head. Lora had seen the frock before but she noted now that two deep flounces had been added in the fashion of a Spanish gypsy's; the lower one reached to the ankles and was spread out over a starched underskirt. Francine's cheeks were rose-flushed, her eyes blue flowers. They were fixed on Lieutenant Carey.

'So you have come to see the horseback wedding, Miss Russell,' Ghislaine said with a cordiality she could only attribute to the general excitement and *bonhomie* of the occasion. 'A pity you are not riding with us.' He spoke, as always, in French and she answered in the same tongue:

'I only wish I were. You all look most romantic. Francie, your frock is *ravissante*.'

'*Je te remercie, Lora*. Nanon spent all yesterday making the flounces. Good afternoon, Lieutenant Carey. Ghislaine, I think you have not met the lieutenant—Monsieur de Boncourt—'

'Where are the rest of your troupe?' Lora inquired.

'They will arrive shortly. *Doucement, Fureur*,' as a cornet

player practised a scale and the bay sidled. 'He does not approve of music.'

'I hope he won't behave badly when the band really starts,' Lora said apprehensively. 'Francie, you must hold very tight——'

'There is nothing to fear,' Ghislaine replied. 'He knows better than to try any tricks with me. As for Francine, I would rather have her up behind me than any other girl. She cannot control a spirited horse herself but she delights to sit pillion and her sense of balance is perfection. *N'est-ce pas, petite?* You perch there like a bird that nothing can detach from its twig and Fureur does not know he carries you in spite of all your petticoats. *Eh bien*, we must join the rest. *Adieu, Mademoiselle, Monsieur——*' he raised his crop in salute, wheeled Fureur and rode off.

Lora watched them cross the square, conscious of an obscure and disconcerting sensation. Ghislaine on his powerful horse, clad in that dashing and highly becoming outfit, was rather a breath-taking figure. His bearing, his confidence, his bold grey eyes, the flash of strong white teeth as he smiled *adieu*—she glanced again at Donald Carey, gentle-mannered, softly spoken, worth a dozen of the ruthless Ghislaine. The happiest prospect for Francie—yes. And yet—and yet——

'Good seat, that guy,' Don was saying. 'Exactly who is he?'

'His family are distant connections of the de Beauvoirs. They have a large place called Bellegarde; vines, of course, and they also breed a few horses. He——' she seized the opportunity to throw in a word of warning, 'he is supposed to be going to marry Francie one of these days.'

'The hell he is. Pardon me, ma'am. I hadn't heard—so they're engaged, are they?'

'Not yet, there is nothing definite, but his family and hers are very anxious for the match.'

'What's little mademoiselle got to say about it?'

'I don't think she is very keen. She has known him all her life and looks upon him rather as a brother. But you know

what French families are; the girls haven't much say. Not girls of Francine's upbringing.'

There was a slight perceptible pause; she wondered if her revelation had badly shocked him. Then he said in his slow drawl:

'So that's the set-up, is it?'

'That's the set-up.'

Was he accepting defeat? Would he bow himself out or make a fight for her? She had no idea as to the seriousness or otherwise of his *penchant* for Francine nor, indeed, of Francine's for him. Attraction, of course, on both sides, but it might be the most ephemeral emotion, a passing summer fancy. Then she forgot both of them as Gervais rode into the square.

Gervais in the same dashing dress; fine-drawn face, eyes alert, searching the crowd—her heart stirred as she saw it was she for whom he searched, finding her and riding over to greet her.

'So you all got here, Lora—good afternoon, Carey——'

'Mind if I take a snap of you, sir? That's a mighty fine animal, beats the big one your sister's on, hollow.'

'I see you are a judge of horseflesh,' Gervais returned pleasantly. 'The big bay has his points but Colombe——' he smoothed the chestnut neck, 'is in a class by himself. Yes, take the snapshot.'

Don moved away to focus his camera; Lora said,

'Ghislaine and Francie came to speak to us. She looks a picture; everyone does.'

He smiled down at her; she was wearing a little scarlet jumper of cobweb thin wool and a white skirt patterned with penny-sized polka dots in matching scarlet. Her hair was confined by a scarf of the same red, tied pirate fashion behind her head.

'Including M^{rs} Russell,' he said. 'I like the gypsy effect. You ought to be in the procession, you are entirely in character.'

'This is a wedding, not a fiesta. Although Francine has gypsified her own frock; you have seen it?'

'I have. She and Ghislaine make a good pair. Is it not so?' His smile was teasing now; she shook her head at him.

'I suppose I must answer yes, to that. At the moment, mounted on Fureur, they do.'

'A concession. A trifle grudging, but still a concession.' His expression changed to one of dissatisfaction. 'I don't like to see you standing here in the crowd. You should be attending this wedding, I cannot think where my mother's wits and mine were. But everything was so rushed——'

'There is no reason in the world why I should have been invited. And I couldn't have deserted, I had to come with the picnic party. I'm a sort of courier, the only one who speaks the language.'

'All the same, I don't like it. It's a false position——' he checked himself. 'I must get along. Alice is due and I'm best man. Till this evening, then.'

'Will you—and Francie—be back? Won't it wind up with a dance for the bridesmaids?'

'No, nothing of that sort. We shall be back for dinner.' He lifted his hat and clattered off, joining the bridegroom and ascending beside him to the church.

Alice appeared, mounted behind her father; she sat erect, a regal young figure in white satin and flowing lace veil. The bridal party fell in, the others who were riding joined the procession, the band struck up. There was some initial dancing on the part of the horses but it was not a noisy band and stood well away from the route; the animals were quickly calmed by their experienced riders. At the top of the slope Alice was lifted from her saddle, the others dismounted and stable lads, there for the purpose, took charge of the horses.

When the religious ceremony was concluded the newly-wed husband mounted again and leant from the saddle to assist his bride. She gave him her hand, put a white-slippered foot on his booted one and went lightly up behind him, Gervais stepping forward to adjust the long folds of her skirt and veil. Then to the strains of the band which had

continued to play for the delectation of the waiting crowd below, and now bravely attacked Mendelssohn's Wedding March, the procession picked their way down the track. Gaining the square, the bridegroom broke into a canter, and to the cheers of the onlookers, with a flourish of whips and flutter of skirts and ribbons and bobbing flowered hats the cavalcade sped away along the valley road. The guests who had arrived less dramatically sought their cars, while the bandsmen and sundry others repaired to the café where a generous *collation* awaited them.

'Well,' Mrs. Howard said, 'if that wasn't just the prettiest thing. Did you all get good snaps, girls? Now let's collect ourselves. Lora, where are we going to picnic?'

Lora wrenched her gaze from the line of departing cars.

'The countess told me there was a perfect spot among those trees behind the church, if you don't mind the climb.'

'The climb will stretch our legs, do us good. Don——' Mrs. Howard signalled young Carey, 'tell Sergeant O'Reilly and Corporal Palewski to bring the baskets. You look tired, Lora; standing too long in the sun. English people aren't used to sun like this.'

Lora wasn't tired but she was suffering from a sense of anti-climax and deflation. The colour and movement of the picturesque affair had thrilled her; with all her heart she had wished she could be one of the gay company, wished she were one of them now at the Château Levesque, drinking champagne, toasting the bride, chattering with Lucienne and Francie—and Gervais——. Instead, she must shepherd her flock to the woods, sit on the ground and eat chicken sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs washed down by soft drinks.

As she walked up the slope she was tormented by a restless impatience, she longed for the day to be over, she could hardly wait until it was time to return to Beauvoir. Her patience was further tried when, on the homeward journey, the lorry engine developed a cough and presently stalled. Sergeant O'Reilly, the driver, and Corporal Palewski

wrestled manfully, advised and assisted by the officers. Eventually, after many false starts the lorry moved again but it had taken a long time and the Sergeant resignedly said that he'd have to nurse her the whole darned way.

When at length they arrived at the Dower House Lora bade them all a hasty good night and raced breathlessly across to the château. It was past the dinner hour, the family would be at table if not half-way through their meal, but she couldn't stop to consider that. She rushed into the great hall and on to the dining-room where the second course had been served.

On the threshold she paused for an instant, framed in the arched stone doorway. There was an air of disorder about her; the dark hair was ruffled, curling back in soft rings over the red scarf which she had forgotten to remove, the young breast rising and falling on quick shallow breaths.

'*Tiens!*' Madame de Bernine who had come over to hear about the wedding, laid down her fork and stared. 'What has happened? A fire?'

Her sister-in-law echoed the question.

'What is wrong, Lora?'

'Nothing, Madame. We had a breakdown—we're just back——'

Gervais had risen and was holding out her chair.

'A breakdown? You must be very tired. Nanon, bring Mademoiselle the soup.'

The countess said,

'One supposed you were dining at the Dower House.' There was no reproof in her tone but she was obviously at a loss to understand why the girl had not done so instead of tearing across to the château in this headlong and unnecessary manner.

'It would, in truth, have seemed the sensible course,' Tante Angele contributed.

Lora, wishing now that she had stayed at the Dower House, saying inwardly that she was making a complete fool of herself, crossed to her place and sat down.

'On the contrary,' Gervais said as he pushed the chair in

for her, 'Lora very sensibly made her escape. So many ladies—charming, of course, but a little overpowering in the end; *n'est-ce pas*, Lora? It has been a long day.'

'Well, it has, rather. I enjoyed it all but we were such ages trying to get the engine to work and then had absolutely to crawl. Everyone got a bit edgy, including me. So I—came over here. Please let me start with the *plat*. I don't want any soup.'

'Some good hot soup is just what you do want, poor tired child,' the countess said kindly. 'It makes no difference, arriving late. I was simply afraid there had been an accident when you appeared.'

Lora was comforted. She was at home, and welcomed. Only the widow continued at intervals to stare with pale, inquisitive eyes. But Lora was used to Tante Angele and thought nothing of it.

A pleasant, relaxed interval followed in the salon as they 'talked the party over'; then the countess proposed an adjournment, an early night being advisable for everyone. The ladies and the two girls went up to their rooms; Nanon brought the *tisanes*; she did not linger to chat with Lora this evening, being concerned with undressing and settling down the over-tired and excited Francine. Lora, making a trip with sponge bag and towel to the bathroom, heard Madame la Comtesse and Madame de Bernine conversing in the former's bedroom.

'You should beware, Louise,' Tante was saying. 'Do you want to see the plan upon which you have set your heart go awry?'

'My plans have not got the habit of going awry, my dear Angele.'

Lora heard no more; a trifle disturbed, she hastened on. Was it possible that the widow was speaking of the plan for Francie and Ghislaine de Boncourt? Had she discovered something about the friendship between the young girl and Lieutenant Carey? No, on second thoughts, it could not be that. Tante would never have uttered a mere word of caution, nor would the countess have received it with

serene disdain, had the subject under discussion concerned any such discovery.

'They would have raised the roof, both of them,' Lora told herself. 'There'd have been the most frightful to-do.'

It was something else, some minor matter, of significance only to the meddling, sharp-nosed *venne* who, with no affairs of her own to occupy her talents took an overweening and obnoxious interest in the affairs of other people.

CHAPTER NINE

Francine, carrying a basket and a pair of shears crossed the courtyard and flitted on into the garden. Lightly, airily, she moved between the flower beds, stopping to cut a bloom here, a bit of greenery there, glancing over her shoulder from time to time as she pursued her casual way. Casual—but anyone intently observing might have detected an underlying purpose. Yard by yard she drew nearer to the woodland; she reached it, cast a final backward glance and darted in. Then she began to run, skirting the clearing and presently emerging upon the river bank at a spot some distance above the place where the children had played. There were stepping-stones here, too; she crossed over and entered the woods on the other side.

A figure in uniform came forward to meet her.

‘So you made it, honey.’

‘Yes, Don.’

‘Give me that——’ he took the basket and they walked on side by side.

It had all started at the Marsans’ tennis party. Donald and Francine had been unable to exchange more than a brief word or two until, when good-byes were being said, he found an opportunity to approach her. He expressed his disappointment; ‘The one person I wanted to talk to.’ And she, in her careful copybook English replied,

‘It would have given me pleasure, also.’

‘It would? No kiddin’? Then we’ve got to do somepin’ about it. Can’t I see you soon?’

She explained, flushing, that she could not ask him to call at the château; that was for Maman or Gervais. He suggested that maybe they could meet somewhere else, go for a walk together; he came out this way quite often, trying to get a line on the poachers. To his gratification but hardly to his surprise, she said she thought perhaps they could.

He knew that French girls were strictly chaperoned, but he had no conception of what he was asking this particular French girl. A walk by the river, in broad daylight—what could be more innocent than that?

The rendezvous was arranged; she had come, and come again on several occasions. Twice she had failed to appear, unable to slip away. Their procedure was always to the same pattern; a ramble through the forest, a rest on some fallen log, talking about themselves and each other, coming to know one another; Donald leading and Francie following along the path of dawning young love.

To her, these stolen meetings were a thrilling and perilous adventure; to him, a tender enchantment. It was not thus that he would have advanced with a girl in his native America. He would quickly have had an American girl in his arms, and instinct told him that he could have Francine there, her innocent mouth his for the kissing. But her very innocence, her youth, her untouched quality had restrained him; to rush this idyllic affair would be to spoil it. He had gone very gently, keeping a rein on his eager young passion, half amused, wholly charmed. It was absurd, but it was very sweet, to walk with her like this, her small hand in his—and no more.

Today, however, matters had changed. There was something he had to get straight, right away.

'Honey,' he said, 'I heard somepin' yesterday.'

'What did you hear, Don?'

'That there was a—a kind of engagement between you and the man you were ridin' with, Monsieur de Boncourt. Why haven't you told me?'

'There was nothing to tell. I am not engaged to Ghislaine and I never will be.'

'But your mother—your brother——'

'They wish it, yes. And his parents also. But for me—never!'

'You aren't in love with him?'

'You know I am not.'

'Arc you in love with someone else?'

She hesitated, her lashes fluttered, then she looked full at him with flower-blue eyes.

'You know that, also.'

'Oh—honey——' it was too much for him. He caught her close and kissed the willing mouth. 'I love you so—I've been hurtin' to kiss you——'

After an interval he said:

'We gotta come clean now, tell the countess and your brother——'

But at that she cried out in alarm. Not yet. Not yet. He and she had met, in public, only three or four times; Gervais would not be deceived; he would guess that they must have been meeting in private. He and Maman would be outraged, forbid her to speak to him again; they might even complain to Colonel Howard.

'Let them complain. What have we done wrong? I have a right to be in love with you, and you with me.'

No, she urged feverishly, Don must wait. They would be meeting each other shortly at other French houses; Bellegarde, for instance, was certain to extend an invitation to the Colonel and a select company of his officers. Maman also spoke of doing so, and there were to be more parties at the Dower House. When he and she had met on these various occasions his interest in her would appear a normal result and no suspicion be aroused. To spring it upon her family now would astound and shock them, Don would be misjudged——

In the end, she had her way.

'Okay,' he promised. 'It still makes nonsense to me, but you know your own people better than I do. And maybe we—we ought to cut out seein' each other alone, now.'

'Oh—no.' It was a childish cry, irrepressible, from her heart.

'But if they find out?'

'They won't. I am very careful.'

'Well——' he gave in. To refuse, was asking too much of human nature.

'It is time for me to go back,' she said.

He took her hand and they walked back to the river. He stood watching the little figure as it crossed the stepping-stones and disappeared. It might be all to the good, he mused, if her people did discover what was going on, it would bring things to a head. There was bound to be a bit of difficulty; the countess and Gervais would take some persuading, they were not likely to favour the idea of Francine going so far away. But that would all be fixed up in the end; his American mind could not conceive of parents or guardians refusing consent to a girl's marrying the man she loved, provided that man were an acceptable suitor, which Don without conceit knew himself to be.

He had agreed to wait, against his will and judgment; it wasn't the right way to go about it, now that he and she had declared their love and were as good as engaged. But she had been so scared, poor baby, so distressed, that he couldn't go on insistin'. She was afraid of a row; he smiled. If they found out, and rowed her, he'd pretty soon put a stop to that. Francine belonged to him, and he could take care of his own.

'The hell with them,' thought Don, cheerfully, as he tramped off to pick up his jeep and return to camp.

CHAPTER TEN

On an evening some ten days or so later Lora came into the salon where the family were gathered as usual.

‘How does it look, Madame?’

She was wearing one of her ballet-length skirts and a sheer blouse with a demure neckline and immense bishop sleeves buttoned at the wrists. Under Nanon’s supervision she had made the blouse herself from a pattern of Lucienne’s.

‘A success, Lora, you have done it very well and the style becomes you.’ Madame la Comtesse eyed her young guest appraisingly. How the child had improved in looks since her arrival. Not that she hadn’t always been pretty, but there was a bloom about her now, more colour in the fair skin, a new radiance in the hazel eyes. A sort of patina—the sun, Louise decided, and the fresh country air.

Tante Angele, again dining with them, was also struck by the girl’s appearance, the buoyancy of her step, the note in Lora’s voice. Tante did not ascribe it to the sun, however, or the pure valley air.

‘I have news for you,’ the countess continued. ‘Bellegarde, as I predicted, is making its gesture.’

‘No!’ Lora’s face twinkled. She had seen something more of the young de Boncourts during these last days; they had ridden over to *gouter* at the château and she had also encountered them when she had gone to play tennis at Les Chenes and Château Marsan. Marcel and the two girls treated her now with careless friendliness, Ghislaine was polite but no more. He still appeared to disapprove of her presence among them, an attitude Lora found amusing rather than distressing.

Madame la Comtesse went on to say that a fête was to be given at Bellegarde in honour of Colonel and Mrs. Howard; the Colonel was to bring with him a select number of his

officers. Some of these officers had wives at the *pension* and the invitation was extended to them.

'Une espèce de cocktail party and a large affair, one gathers. Everyone of standing in the valley will be there. You have not yet been to Bellegarde, Lora.'

'No, Madame. Am I—expected?'

'Why shouldn't you be?' Gervais demanded.

'Well——' she sent him a laughing glance, reminding him without words that she was not exactly popular with a certain member of that family.

'Certainly you are expected,' the countess replied. 'Miss Russell is expressly mentioned in Helene de Boncourt's note.'

'How very nice of her. And so Ghislaine has had to bow to higher authority?'

'I suspect he is content. Since others are making these *démarches*, he will wish to show what Bellegarde can do, and do a little better than anyone else.'

'How like Ghislaine. It will be better done, then?'

'At any rate, it will be differently done.'

Lora made a calculation.

'There'll be about ten women going from the *pension*; the Colonel will probably send a couple of big cars. Shall I go with them?'

'You will not,' Gervais said. 'You'll come with my mother and Francine and myself. And Tante Angele,' he added with his invariable punctiliousness towards his tiresome relative.

'For my part,' sighed the widow who had every intention of going, 'I should be glad of a few hours distraction but in my so deep mourning—I do not wish to cast a shadow——'

'As for that,' her sister-in-law retorted, 'it is not reasonable to persist in your deep mourning. You should end this régime, my good Angele. One honours your respect for your dead, but after fifteen years—no, it is too much. In effect, fantastic.'

'I am foolish, no doubt, but I cannot change, Louise. My weeds have become a part of myself. They embody my memories.'

On the contrary, thought Lora, they are your badge, your sole claim to distinction. Without them you would be just like any ordinary elderly woman. And that would not please *la veuve* Bernine.

'As you will,' the countess conceded. 'It is not, after all, my affair. But in the matter of coming to Bellegarde, you have been there often enough in your weeds and to the homes of our other friends. No one at this date is affected; you speak truly in saying they have become a part of yourself. *Allons*, do not make difficulties; you will naturally accompany us.'

Gervais drew a small object from his pocket.

'I think this is yours, Lora. Jean found it, caught on a vine. He saw something glittering——'

'Oh—my clip—I hadn't missed it. Thank you very much.'

'You have been assisting Francine in the vineyards, Lora?' Tante inquired. Francine was frequently to be found there, working between the rows; she enjoyed the task and had a thorough knowledge of the cultivation of the vines.

'No,' Lora answered. 'I wasn't helping Francine. Gervais took me over the vineyards this afternoon, the first time I had really seen them.'

'There is little to see. One vine is like another.'

'That,' Gervais said, 'is profoundly true, and Lora was no doubt sadly bored. But she has been well brought up and indulged my proprietary weakness by a pretence of enthusiasm.'

Lora laughed.

'I wasn't pretending. I was exceedingly interested.'

'It pleased mademoiselle to say so.'

'Mademoiselle means what she says.'

The widow looked from one to the other with speculative eyes. Nanon announced dinner.

Bellegarde lay about five miles distant on the far side of the road, away from the foothills. It was a valuable

property and an ancient one, but it lacked the distinguished history of Beauvoir. Its beginnings had been humble, a farmstead, to be exact. With the passing of years the old house, the 'château' as all the wine growers called their houses had been improved and added to but its original character remained.

As the countess's car turned in at the entrance to the estate on the day of the party, Lora gazed ahead with lively curiosity. They drove up a short avenue between spreading fields; there was an air of space and light here, very pleasing if less romantic than the properties on the wooded, mountainous side. Facing them, at the end of the drive was a long, one-storied building of whitewashed brick, roofed with sepia tiles. In the centre above a wide archway rose a square tower and at each end stood round towers reminiscent of Kentish oast-houses on a larger and more solid scale. Lora judged that this was the stabling, and granaries.

They drove in through the archway and saw the château across a cobbled yard; another long white building with rambling roofs at different levels. This was the back of the house; they left the car here and followed a path around to the front where a garden sloped down from a flagged terrace. On the terrace the two Messieurs with their wives awaited their guests.

Lora was presented; Madame—Madame—Monsieur de Boncourt, Monsieur André de Boncourt.

'Monsieur André is the father of Marcel and Annette,' the countess said, 'and this is Ghislaine's father. Mademoiselle has made the acquaintance of your young people, Charles.'

'So I have heard, and that she speaks admirable French. Welcome to Bellegarde, mademoiselle.'

Lora, making an appropriate response, saw Ghislaine before her in the person of his father, or Ghislaine as he might be in twenty to twenty-five years' time. The same upright figure and free bearing, but youthful arrogance had mellowed to calm assurance. The same clear grey eyes, straight gazing, but the bold gaiety of the son's had, in the

father's, given place to a wise and tempered expression. The same quick smile and strong white teeth but a mouth that showed discipline, humorous but not mocking. A fine face, steady and dependable; a countryman's face, deeply tanned. He was wearing white flannels, a white silk shirt, navy-blue jacket and a Basque beret.

'Well,' thought Lora, captivated, 'if Ghislaine develops like *this*——'

It seemed a remote possibility at the moment.

Having chatted for a few minutes with their hosts, the de Beauvoirs and Lora went down to the garden where numerous other guests were strolling about or taking their ease on sun-warmed old stone benches reinforced by striped canvas chairs. The Americans had arrived and were admiring the layout of the grounds, the formal hedges and pointed cypresses, the pool with its fountain. There were not many flowers; one gained the impression that the de Boncourts as a whole were more concerned with their vines and their horses; there was no trace of that unmistakable feminine pre-occupation with beds and borders that one finds in all English and many French gardens.

Lora stopped to speak to some of her flock; as she was about to go on and join Gervais and Francine who were chatting with Lucienne Tessier she heard an exclamation behind her.

'Lordy!' It was Donald Carey. 'Who is that?' He was gazing, fascinated, at Tante Angele, swathed in her black—her best black today—the great veil with its wide *crêpe* edging, a formidable garment.

'Madame de Bernine. Haven't you seen her before? She was with us the day Colonel Howard inspected the *pension* but she had gone into the house when you arrived. I remember. And you didn't go indoors, did you?'

'No, I stayed out. Who did you say she is?'

'Madame de Bernine. She's Francine's aunt. A widow——'

'You're tellin' me. Widow.' He smiled his slow, engaging smile 'The mostest widow I ever did see, I must get a snap—' he raised his unobtrusive little camera, then

lowered it. 'No, that would be kinda makin' fun of a lady's bereavement. What was I thinkin' of?'

Lora suppressing a desire to laugh, agreed that it would be better not to photograph Madame de Bernine. Nice boy; he was kind, and had been taught consideration for others and to respect the dignity of the individual. No such delicacy of feeling would have restricted the ruthless Ghislaine.

'*Bonjour*, Miss Russell, *Monsieur le Lieutenant*——' Ghislaine himself had approached them. '*Enchanté de vous voir chez nous*.'

Lora watched with mixed feelings as the two young men shook hands, the one unconscious, the other fully conscious of the bond between them.

'My father,' Ghislaine continued in halting but very passable English for Donald's benefit, 'conducts Monsieur le Colonel and some others on a little tour. I do not know if you will find it of interest——'

They said they would be very much interested. Lora congratulated him on his command of her language, to which he replied with characteristic lack of finesse that it was a language he disliked but a certain elementary knowledge was necessary because of one's affiliations with British importers who appeared incapable of learning French.

Gervais, with Francine and Lucienne joined them and they set off with a group of American guests, Colonel Howard and Monsieur le Boncourt in the lead.

They passed through vegetable gardens where espaliered fruit and fig trees spread their branches, and under a long whitewashed brick pergola upon which grapes of particular succulence were grown for the table. Then they came to a vast expanse of meadow land dotted with old, gnarled, silvery-leaved trees. There were no tennis courts at Bellegarde but a walled court had been erected for pelota, which fast and furious game was played by all the young men in the district.

In a fenced enclosure some young bulls were grazing; during the vintage celebrations, Ghislaine said, these bulls

with others from neighbouring farms would provide a day's sport, an affair of many thrills and an element of danger but with no harm accruing to the animals.

Beyond the great expanse with its coarse dry grass were the vineyards, stretching away in row upon ordered row, and over all was that sense of space and light and wide skies.

It was exactly the sort of place the de Boncourts should have, Lora reflected, the proper setting for that hard-riding cheerful, uninhibited troupe. Just as Beauvoir, shadowy, backed by its woods and wild ravines was the right setting for the more highly-strung, complex Gervais. Lora preferred the de Beauvoir estate which was infinitely more beautiful, but she found this one delightful none the less.

At the Colonel's request they inspected the *chais*, another picturesque old building where the grapes were pressed and their juice ran into a huge vat. Monsieur de Boncourt explained the process and the marriage, as he expressed it, of the fermenting juices.

'The moment of consummation, that is what must be reckoned by the fraction of a fraction and no two vintages are alike. The grape is of a temperament, you understand.'

'How *can* one tell?' Lora asked of Gervais.

'Instinct. The wine grower's gift.'

'Have you that instinct?'

'Not he,' Ghislaine cried in his gay derisive tones. 'He is no true wine man, that one there.'

'And you, of course, are,' Lora could not resist saying with considerable tartness. He gave her his cool look.

'I possess the gift, inherited from my father. Lieutenant Carey, have you an interest in horses?'

Donald replied that he had and the young people made their way to the stables.

They had a word with Fureur, looking wistfully out of his loose box, and saw the noble Percherons which were bred on the estate, and a pair of patient oxen who worked in the vineyards. Then they went on to look at the small Spanish

horses the de Boncourts were breeding as an experiment. Ghislaine brought one trim little mare out into the yard; she whinnied softly and nuzzled him as he stroked her.

'She is fond of you,' Lora said.

He explained that he had the exclusive handling of her, she was being especially trained for Francine.

'That's a mighty nice present,' Donald Carey drawled. 'Mademoiselle is in luck.'

'Gervais is buying the jennet for me,' Francine said quickly. 'He insists that it is time I began seriously to ride.'

'It is,' Ghislaine declared. 'I cannot always have you up behind me. You will soon conquer your fear when you are mounted on this gentle filly.'

He spoke in his own tongue, but Donald caught the gist of it.

'You're nervous, mademoiselle? Then maybe you ought to leave it alone. Ridin' is born in you, or else it isn't. Like wine judgin',' he finished with a sidelong glance at the Frenchman.

Ghislaine regarded him with momentary hauteur, as if to imply that the opinion of an outsider had not been invited and was not appreciated. Then he said, shortly but mildly:

'It is necessary for mademoiselle to ride. Shall we now return and find refreshment?'

They walked back to the house where the guests were congregating about a trestle table set up below the terrace. It was bountifully laden with savoury titbits and *petits fours*, glasses of various shapes and bottles of wine. Bellegarde did not go in for cocktails which they considered a debased taste. The two Messieurs officiated; this was a sweet wine, this a drier, the ladies would doubtless prefer the sweet—they must all help themselves and keep their glasses replenished.

The guests filled their glasses and carried them, with plates of snacks, to the garden seats. Two men with accordions came on to the terrace and began to play. Lora, eyes dancing, said to herself that the de Boncourts *would*

have accordion players, it was the finishing touch and in perfect keeping with the homestead.

The afternoon had been hot and still, but now a heavenly little breeze wandered through the garden. The declining sun took on a golden sheen, the cypresses thrust long fingers of shadow across the lawns. Relaxed in a canvas chair between Lucienne and Gervais, Lora felt an exquisite happiness invading her. The cooling air with its scents of sun-baked meadow and vine leaves and aromatic hedges, the lovely light, the deep-drawn chords of the instruments playing sentimental tunes, the close proximity of the girl who had become her friend and the man with whom she was in love, all combined to raise her to a state of felicity. She even felt benevolently disposed towards Tante Angele, pausing to say she had lost sight of Louise and obliging Gervais to spring up and carry her glass and plate and find his mother and establish Tante at her side.

'Are you enjoying the party, Lora?' Lucienne asked while they were temporarily alone.

'Every minute of it. The countess said it would be different, and it is. One can imagine parties like this being given here for generations—the same sort of simplicity, wine drinking, and men playing accordions——'

Lucienne shrugged.

'Bellegarde does not change, nor does the rest of the valley.'

'That is its charm.'

'As a novelty, yes. You would soon tire if you had to live here, and want to go back to your London and all that a big city offers.'

'Big cities can wear very thin.'

They continued amicably to argue; Gervais came back; a quartet of youthful peasants appeared on the terrace and gave a charming little exhibition of folk dances. Ghislaine, with his sister and cousins who had been assiduously attending to their guests, refilling glasses, stopping to talk with this one and that, proving themselves better hosts than Lora would have expected of the casual troupe, now joined the

other young people who were scattered around the chairs where Lora sat with her companions. Francine was there, Lieutenant Carey close at hand; Ghislaine seated himself on the grass beside them. The folk dancers retired, the musicians were refreshed with tumblers of red wine and played again.

Lucienne presently strolled away to chat with someone else; Lora and Gervais sat on in the deepening twilight; a dreamy silence held them which neither seemed inclined to break.

I will remember this evening, Lora was thinking. All my life I will remember it.

Then, abruptly, Gervais was on his feet.

'I think the music is finished, people seem to be going indoors. Shall we make a move, Lora?'

'Oh—yes—I believe I was half asleep.' Her voice was not quite steady. As she attempted to rise she slipped nervelessly back again. Gervais gave her his hand and she stood up.

'That is what comes of having three glasses of wine,' she laughed.

'Blame the low deck-chair, not the third glass,' he responded.

Colonel Howard and his wife with some of the other American contingent were saying their good-byes; several of the women had to get back to their children, the men to camp. Everyone else lingered, in no hurry to depart. They stood chatting in the big square hall and the salon; coffee was being dispensed to any who cared for a hot drink. Gervais was buttonholed by Monsieur Marsan; Lora, in the doorway of the salon, bright-eyed and smiling as she watched the animated groups, drew aside to allow Madame la Comtesse and Madame de Bernine to pass.

'Well, my child,' the countess said, 'have you enjoyed the little *fête champêtre*?'

Lora replied that she had loved it, adding that she and Lucienne had embarked on an argument concerning life in the valley.

‘Lucienne does not know how lucky she is to have a home here.’

‘Ah,’ the widow said, ‘we all know Lucienne’s views, but she will have to adjust them before long when she marries Gervais.’

Lora’s red lips parted on a sharply drawn breath, the colour draining from her face, the bright look wiped away as if Tante had drawn a cloth across it.

‘Miss Russell.’ Ghislaine stood before them. He must have been close at hand, she hadn’t noticed him—‘Miss Russell, would it amuse you to see our single dramatic asset? Bellegarde cannot boast ruins or an ancient nunnery—’ he flicked a mischievous glance at the countess, ‘*mais on fait de son mieux*. We can exhibit a secret door and tunnel.’

‘I——’ Lora pulled herself together. ‘I should be thrilled to see it.’

He led her through the hall and into a passage connecting the different wings of the house.

‘There is not very much to see,’ he said, ‘but I wished to create a diversion. The tongue of the *veuve* is too long, as no doubt you have discovered.’

‘I have,’ Lora assented, struggling to combat the cold sick feeling that crept about her heart. ‘But was there anything out of the way in what she said just now? If—if Lucienne and Gervais are engaged—it can surely be no secret?’

He gave her an oblique look—she was still very pale—as he replied,

‘Neither Lucienne nor Gervais would be pleased to have their private affairs referred to in a room crowded with people. The engagement between them is not official as yet and this valley is a hotbed of gossip. But you have not been informed? I should have thought, so intimate a friend——’

‘No,’ she said over a rising bitterness that fully agreed with him, ‘this is the first I have heard of it. There is no reason,’ she went on hurriedly, ‘why I should have been told. The countess makes me feel very much at home but

I am not one of the family. And I see comparatively little of them, being at the Dower House all day. You can depend on my not gossiping about it,' she finished lightly, 'although I think it very nice news. Tell me about this tunnel of yours. Was it used by smugglers?'

He gave her another quick look, a more approving one than he had as yet vouchsafed Miss Russell. It was almost as if he had said *Well done*.

'We have never fathomed to what use it was put,' he replied. 'Not for actual smuggling, it does not extend far enough. But it might have been a hiding place and means of escape for someone engaged in that trade. Or perhaps it was built by some gallant ancestor of ours in order to meet a lady love.'

'That seems excessive,' she smiled. 'So much labour and expense when your ancestor could easily have slipped out by a back door or window. I think the means of escape is more likely to be the answer.'

'Probably, but an answer of less romance. Here we are—' Ghislaine opened a door, switched on a light and they entered a small panelled room. 'I will show you the spring—' he guided her hand to the right spot, told her to press hard and a panel swung silently forward, disclosing blackness behind.

'A torch is kept in this drawer——' he crossed to a small *secrétaire*. The torch was a powerful one; he shone it into the opening and she saw a short flight of steps under a low bricked roof.

'How exciting. Where does it lead to?'

He told her it led to the centre of the principal lawn where there was a flagged square planted with mosses and stone-crop. One of the flags was a camouflaged trap-door, very easily manipulated; it had been preserved and kept in working order. In the old days, he explained, all the grounds on that side of the house had been covered with dense scrub growth, providing effective cover.

'Would you like to walk through? It is quite dry and the air sufficiently ventilated.'

'I'd love to.' She could say no less. Ten minutes earlier she would have been genuinely interested, now it meant nothing to her but she guessed that although he had disparaged it he was proud of his tunnel, and she owed him a debt of gratitude for having unwittingly rescued her from the eyes of the countess and Tante Angele. If he hadn't been there, at that precise moment, she would have betrayed her shock; she had felt herself paling, the sudden chill like icy fingers on her cheeks. He had diverted their attention and there could not have been time for the elder ladies to observe anything.

'Then we shall do so,' he was saying, 'and astonish our friends who are still in the garden; I think there are several who have not yet come in. We will arise from the ground as if a grave were giving up its dead; it used to be one of the favourite pastimes of my cousin and myself when we were younger.'

It would be, she thought. Scaring people out of their wits. But she followed him as he went ahead lighting the way for her.

If he hoped to astonish those who loitered in the dusky garden, Ghislaine succeeded admirably. As he and Lora materialized in the middle of the lawn there was a shriek—'Oh, Don——' someone called 'What the hell——' and then a medley of laughing exclamations. Lora saw the Marsan girls and Francine, Marcel and his sister and three Americans, one of whom was Donald Carey. It was Francine who had shrieked and rushed to him, evidently tripping and turning her ankle; she stood on one foot clinging to his supporting arm.

'How the heck——' the two other American youths hastened to investigate. 'Well, whadda you know? Say, can we go down here?'

'If you wish,' Ghislaine said. 'Marcel, conduct *les messieurs*; the panel is open. Take this torch.' He went over to Francine. 'What is the matter? You are hurt?'

'I twisted my foot, it hurt for a second but it is better now.'

'I regret. I did not mean to cause an accident. Let me help you up to the house.'

'I'll take her,' Don said easily. 'Put your arm over my shoulder, mademoiselle.'

Ghislaine stared.

'I will assist mademoiselle.'

'Francie, are you there?' Gervais ran down from the terrace. 'Maman desires you—*tiens*, what has happened?'

'This wretch of a Ghislaine,' Suzette Marsan cried; and hilariously explained what had occurred. 'Myself, I had forgotten that tunnel and believed he and Miss Russell were ghosts. *Les officiers aussi, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur le Lieutenant?* It was very funny, all the same.'

Gervais laughed and shook his head.

'Ghislaine, when do you intend to mature? I thought you had abandoned this trick.' He looked at Lora. 'You, too. A pair of infants——' Her heart lurched as she met the teasing dark eyes. The look she so loved—that could never hold any meaning for her——

'I plead guilty,' she said. 'I couldn't resist. Sorry, Francie.'

'No, please, I was silly to be so startled. I have played that game myself with Armande and Annette. As for my foot, it is nothing.'

'Come along, then.' There was no question now as to who should or should not assist mademoiselle. Gervais took hold of her, tucking her arm under his. 'Put your weight on me, *chérie*. Lora, my mother is preparing to leave.'

While Madame la Comtesse made her *adieux*, a proceeding that took time, Ghislaine sought Gervais, tapped his shoulder and drew him through the open door of the hall. As they stepped out into the night which had swiftly darkened the younger man said imperiously:

'I want a word with you, my friend.'

'Indeed?' Gervais cocked an eyebrow. 'You sound very portentous. A word in what connection?'

'Francine. That young American officer, Carey, is very

much *épris* with her and takes no pains to conceal it. I have seen what I have seen, today, and I think it will be well for you to drop him a discreet hint.'

'My dear Ghislaine, what is all this? Francine and young Careyl Impossible. He cannot be serious——'

'Why not?'

'Francine is only seventeen—and she is French——'

'Be intelligent, I beg of you. What difference does that make?'

'Well,' Gervais admitted, 'none, I suppose. But I cannot believe—one thinks of her still as a child——'

'You mistake, when you think of her as a child. You are singularly lacking in perception.'

'Do you mean,' Gervais's voice quickened, 'that she, too, is *éprise*? What is it, then, that you have seen today?'

'I believe her greatly attracted. He is, unfortunately, good-looking; he wears a uniform; he is someone new, different, whose manner with young girls is freer than is customary among ourselves. She is flattered, excited by his attentions. And they are on familiar terms; it was to him she called and ran when Miss Russell and I so unexpectedly appeared. *Eh bien*, you should keep an eye on her, Gervais.'

'I'll keep an eye on them both,' Gervais returned forcibly, 'if——' he broke off. Madame de Bernine was beside them in the darkness. They had not heard her coming, no one ever did hear the widow coming because of her addiction to those old-fashioned soft-soled shoes.

'*C'est toi, Gervais?* My dear nephew, do you think you could approach Louise and with tact suggest that time advances? It has been a most agreeable occasion but I find myself somewhat fatigued.'

'I will see what can be done, Tante.'

The countess was detached from her friends, Francine and Lora collected, Ghislaine escorted the family to their car. Gervais saw his mother into the front seat, Tante and Francine got in behind, Ghislaine held the door for Lora.

'Good night, Miss Russell, a great pleasure to have had you today at Bellegarde——'

'It has been a grand party. I've enjoyed it so much.'

To this he responded with one of those wicked gay grins that always seemed laughing at, not with you. For a fleeting instant she wondered what had called it forth, why he should find amusement in her saying she had enjoyed the party. Then he handed her in, the door slammed, and the car moved off.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Well, Louise, you will do me the justice to admit I have been right. You saw for yourself——'

'I saw, yes. And I must say, Angele, you astonished me. It was neither the time nor the place—nor had you any business to voice aloud this matter which is still a private one.'

'It had to be done. She had been sitting out there with him in the twilight, she was in an *exaltée* state as, indeed, she has been during the past week. For her own sake, if nothing else, it was time she learned the truth. The opportunity presented itself and I seized upon it.'

Madame la Comtesse and her sister-in-law were in the former's bedroom enjoying a *tisane* before retiring. Both ladies wore dressing-gowns and had let down their hair; Louise's, still abundant, full of vitality, hung in a thick plait over one shoulder, Tante's scantier locks were brushed uncompromisingly back from her forehead and dangled in two little rat tails.

'I ask myself,' she continued, 'why you have not long ago informed her.'

'How could I inform her of what at present is the personal affair of Gervais and Lucienne? If they do not as yet see fit to speak, was it for me to do so? Make this gratuitous announcement to my young guest—a comparative stranger—as if warning her off? Come, Angele.'

'Nevertheless, you see what has arrived from not warning her. She has fallen in love with him——'

'She will recover. It is simply an attack of calf love for the first real man she has met. A little art student, whose men friends are naturally other art students; long-haired, effeminate, one knows the type,' Louise declared, sweepingly and inaccurately for she had never known anyone connected with art save Lora.

The widow nodded.

'She will now, one concludes, find some excuse and go back to England.'

'I don't think so, for a moment. Lora is obviously quite unconscious of having betrayed her feelings and will be under no embarrassment. She is enchanted with the life here and in spite of this—shall we say disappointment—I am sure she will not want to leave.'

'Then you should send her home.'

'Why should I do that? She has committed no fault, and whatever girlish notion may have arisen, it has been nipped in the bud. It cannot have gone deeply with her, she has seen very little of Gervais. An occasional hour with us in the salon when he spends the evening at home and the one or two entertainments which we have all attended. I am certain that they have been alone together—if you can call it alone—only twice; the day they took the American children to the river and yesterday's walk through the vineyards.'

'It is enough——'

The countess shook her head.

'Not for anything of a serious nature. It is a mere youthful infatuation on her part and now that she understands the situation she will come to her senses and write *finis*. Lora does not lack character and is also blessed with a light-hearted nature.'

'All the same,' Tante persisted, 'I think it would be best for her to go. She betrayed herself to us and it is possible that some unguarded word or look may reveal her feelings to Gervais. His interest would be at once secured, he could not fail to be impressed—Lora is an unusually pretty girl, remember.'

'I do not think he stands in any danger, although to be frank with you I could wish this had not happened. But send her home? What excuse could I offer? What would Ella think of such treatment of the little niece she confided to my care? To put so grave a slight upon the child—no one would believe she had not done something reprehensible—can you imagine the gossip that would ensue? As for

Gervais, if I wished to arouse his interest in Lora, his indignant championship, I could go no better way about it.'

'Perhaps you are right there, Louise.'

'Of course I am right. And finally,' the countess said briskly, 'I cannot afford to lose her. She has made a great success of the *pension*; it is owing to her exertions and her personality that the guests have been so contented in what, from their point of view, is an isolated dull locality. Am I to be left, at this juncture, with no manageress, let alone one with her qualifications? I have invested a good deal in the venture and do not intend to forego my profit.'

This was an argument in which the widow warmly sympathized.

'You are right. I had not considered that angle.'

'For the rest,' the other concluded, 'Gervais is no impressionable boy. He is nearly twenty-eight, his future arranged, his honour involved. He will not be deflected, even by so pretty a face as Lora's. So let us say and think no more about it. Are you ready for bed?'

'One moment. There is another matter——'

Madame la Comtesse sighed inaudibly. She herself was more than ready.

'I happened to overhear, by the merest chance tonight,' Tante went on, 'a few words between Gervais and Ghislaine. It seems that a certain American officer is greatly taken by Francine. I did not hear them speak his name, but it is obvious that the man in question can be none other than the Lieutenant Carey.'

'Lieutenant Carey? Which is he?'

'My dear Louise, you must know whom I mean. He was at the Marsans', and the Tessiers', and again today at Belle-garde, and he was one of the officers who came with Monsieur le Colonel the other evening to have a drink with Gervais. A handsome youth, tall, slim——'

'They are all tall and slim and, I confess, all look alike to me. I cannot distinguish one from another.'

'You may presently have good cause to distinguish this

American from the others. Ghislaine considered him decidedly *épris* and believes Francine to be flattered by his admiration.'

'She would hardly be a normal girl if she were not.'

'You take it calmly, *ma belle-sœur*.'

'How do you expect me to take it? Francine is also unusually pretty and, short of veiling her, it is inevitable that she should excite admiration.'

'Ghislaine was not pleased——'

'I daresay. He dislikes Americans and would resent one of them casting eyes at the child. But there it is; she is growing up and taking her place in society; these things are bound to occur. I hope Gervais reassured him.'

'Gervais found it more serious than you appear to do. He said he would keep an eye on them both.'

'Then neither you nor I need concern ourselves. Gervais is quite capable of looking after his stepsister. And now—it is getting late——'

Tante rose from her chair.

'I hope there will be no trouble but one cannot forget that Francine has bad blood in her veins.'

'One cannot, in truth,' the countess rejoined tartly, 'since you continuously remind us of the fact. Why will you not let it rest—one could almost believe that you hate Francine and wish her to behave badly.'

'How can you speak so. How can you be so cruel. You know it is my desperate anxiety on her account, the child of my beloved brother, my one living link——'

'Well, well——' Louise wanted to get to bed, 'I spoke too hastily. Forget it, Angele. Good night, my dear.'

In her room at the end of the corridor, Lora stood looking out across the dark valley. The evening was ended at last, the strain relieved, there was no more need to smile and chatter and play her part. She had managed to play it while they talked the party over, seated around the table where Nanon had hot *bouillon* and cold meat and salad awaiting them. Now she was alone, could let go; the tide of tears in

her breast, pressing for release, could have their way. But she wouldn't cry—she wouldn't——

Her thoughts raced to and fro, feverish and disjointed. He should have told me. There was no reason why he should. He has led me to believe—he has done no such thing. He showed plainly that he liked me, very much—well, why shouldn't he like me? But it wasn't fair—good heavens, why not? Must a man take for granted that every girl he is nice to will fall in love with him?

By degrees she calmed, got her thoughts into order, crept to her bed.

There was nothing to be bitter about; Gervais had given her no good reason to believe he was in love with her. She was the one at fault, surrendering her heart unasked, building a fairy castle out of dreams.

So that was that. It had been a shock, but already she was recovering. She wouldn't give him another thought——

Suddenly Lora hid her face against her pillow. Gervais. Oh, Gervais.

There was a severe thunderstorm in the night and a tremendous downpour of rain lasting several hours. But the skies had cleared and the sun was shining when Lora, who had fallen into a heavy sleep of exhaustion, opened her eyes to see the little maid at her bedside with the breakfast tray.

'Is it late, Germaine?'

The girl replied that it was past nine o'clock; everyone had slept late after the storm. Mademoiselle Francine was still sleeping.

Lora drank her coffee, found no appetite for the rolls, got up and proceeded to dress. The brief sleep had not refreshed her; her eyelids felt weighted and her cheekbones stiff. She was young enough, however, to show no ill effects from her bad night except for a not unbecoming touch of pallor and a hint of blue shadow below her eyes.

Quietly she slipped down the staircase and out into the brilliant morning. The gardens had drunk avidly of the revivifying rain, colours were renewed and intensified. The

little woodland showed a fresher green, the leaves rustling in a light breeze, shimmering as their wet surfaces reflected the sun. As she reached the clearing where, so unexpectedly, one caught sight of the Dower House Lora paused as she did every morning; familiar though it was, this first glimpse never failed to move her, she felt a tug at her heart each time.

There was no one about; the lovely building stood tranquil across the green sward, the long line of its roof gilded with sunlight, the tall windows framed in their wide shutters and the arched stone doorway still partly in shadow. Lora gazed at the place she loved so well; *her* house, hers forever as she had once declared.

Suddenly she stiffened as a thought, hitherto unheeded, struck her full force. The *Dower* House in which the heir to the estate would live, when he married, until he came into his inheritance. Gervais would live here with his wife. Gervais—and Lucienne.

‘No,’ said Lora aloud. ‘Oh, no.’

‘Mademoiselle addresses herself? That is a bad sign.’

She whirled around and saw Gervais.

‘Did I startle you? I am sorry. These shoes—I did not mean to creep——’ he was wearing rubber-soled plimsolls.

She had assured herself that there was nothing to be bitter about but a wave of something very much like bitterness surged within her now. The easy greeting, sure of her happy response, the familiar, teasing smile——

‘It’s all right.’ She spoke curtly. ‘I didn’t hear you and was thinking of something else. I must go in, it is late.’

He was taken aback.

‘Lora?’ She saw the astonishment in his eyes. ‘Is anything—are you not well?’

Ashamed of her rudeness, blinking her lashes because of a nervous prick of tears behind her tired eyelids she answered:

‘Perfectly well, thanks, but a bit snappy. I expect we all had rather a bad night. But the storm was worth it, everything looks so clear and shining.’

‘Miss Russell looks a little pale. You don’t have to go in

at once, surely? Come for a stroll to the river; the fresh air will do you good.'

Yesterday Lora would have jumped at the chance of a stroll with Gervais but there was no joy in it now. The less she saw of him the better. She was about to refuse, then checked herself. Had he heard about Tante's officious remark last evening? If his mother had not yet told him, she would certainly do so shortly. At all costs, then, it behoved Lora to behave normally, to appear the happy, carefree girl he was accustomed to. If she didn't—and already she had astonished him by snapping—then he might well put two and two together.

'No, I don't have to go in,' she replied. 'I just got out of the wrong side of my bed. I'd like to come for a walk.'

They turned back through the wood and took the bridle-path.

'I was anxious to have a word with you,' he said. 'I am a little worried about Francine.'

'Francine?' Lora's voice was innocently inquiring, her eyes wary.

He told her what Ghislaine had reported to him.

'You and Francie are very good friends; has she given you any reason to think she is especially interested in the lieutenant?'

'She has said nothing at all to me,' Lora responded, with truth.

'Have you observed anything,' he pursued. 'Women are very acute in these matters.'

'I have noticed that he admires her. So do all the others. Francie is extremely attractive.'

'I am not concerned with the others. She seems on surprisingly familiar terms with this young man. Ghislaine tells me she ran to him and called him by his Christian name—you heard and saw also, of course?'

'I did.' Lora's tone was light and scornful. 'She was startled—they all thought they were seeing ghosts—and rushed to the nearest person. As for calling him "Don"—

if you and Ghislaine were shocked by that, you are in for a series of shocks.'

'A series?'

'We have all come to first names. Americans don't stand on ceremony and everyone is following suit. The only one who still "Miss Russells" me is Ghislaine himself; to keep me in my place, I suppose. Really, Gervais; do you expect girls to go on "Monsieuring" or "Lieutenanting" the boys they dance and play tennis with and meet at cocktail parties and all the rest of it? You and Ghislaine need waking up; you're absurd.'

It was impossible not to laugh at this vigorous attack and Gervais did laugh, but he gave her a keen look as he said:

'Is this evasive action? Are you being candid with me, Lora?'

'Candid?' Faint colour stained her cheeks. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean—do you know more about this matter of Francine and young Carey than you are willing to say?'

'If I did,' she retorted, in the same light vein, 'do you think I would inform on Francine? You shouldn't ask me; *ça ne se fait pas* as your mother would say.'

'I know it is not done, I am infringing the rules. But——' his voice took on a more serious note, 'Francine's welfare is of more importance than any rule of etiquette. If you do know anything, please tell me. I understand your reluctance but, believe me, you will be doing her no service by concealment.'

Lora was inclined to agree. It seemed to her that the sooner this affair were brought into the open, the better. Could she betray them? Ought she to do so? Gervais, as Francine's guardian surely had every right—No. Lora's pretty mouth tightened. She couldn't turn informer. What was more, she *wouldn't*. Francine's guardian had kept his own counsel concerning his engagement to Lucienne, he had behaved as an unattached young man when he was entirely the reverse. Very well; Lora could keep silent too. Just what bearing this resentful and revengeful sentiment

had upon the case in point, she would have found difficult to explain to the satisfaction of any inquirer. But it satisfied her own sore heart; it was, in effect, getting back at Gervais.

'I have told you,' she said. 'I know nothing.'

'*Bon.*' He gave her a little nod, dismissing the subject.

She felt a pang then. He looked as if he did not believe her, but was courteously accepting her word. The pleasure of having got back at him fled. She had lied to Gervais—'But I didn't lie,' she insisted inwardly. 'I know nothing officially, it's all guesswork on my part. Besides, it isn't for me to tell tales.'

They had reached the river. Swollen by the rain, the water ran chuckling along its wide bed, tumbling over the small jutting rocks, flinging up miniature fountains, having fun.

'Oh, glorious,' Lora cried, carried away by the gaiety and sparkle of the scene. 'The children will be thrilled; I'd like to play in it myself.'

'Shall we cross the torrent?' Gervais suggested; the stepping-stones were only half submerged. 'That will be playing—unless you must be getting back?'

She hadn't wanted to come with him but she didn't want to go back.

'Let's cross. I am in no hurry.'

'Step carefully,' he warned. 'I'll give you a lead.'

Some of the stones were slimy; as she set a foot on the final one she slipped. Gervais caught her and drew her to the bank.

'All right? Did you get your feet wet?'

'No, not at all. Thank you so much.'

'A pleasure, mademoiselle.'

Again the indulgent, amused look—her heart gave a twist of pain. He was making it very hard for her; she shouldn't have prolonged this walk. But she couldn't turn back now, after having said she wanted to go on.

They walked along the bank as they had done on that former day, towards the track down which the de Boncourt troupe had come riding. She was convinced by this time

that the countess had not told her son of what Madame de Bernine had said; if he were aware that Lora knew of his engagement he would undoubtedly have made some reference to it.

'Shall I say something myself?' she pondered. 'If I don't he may think it rather odd, my having kept silent. And why *should* I go on pretending ignorance?'

She decided to speak, but could not think how to introduce the subject. To blurt it out, apropos of nothing, was difficult. Then she had her chance.

They had come to the foot of the track.

'No cloak and dagger party this morning,' Gervais said, and continued, 'You and Ghislaine seemed to be getting on very well, yesterday.'

'As a matter of fact we did. I am beginning to revise my opinion of him. I had imagined him utterly callous but he can be considerate and thoughtful.'

'How and when did you make this interesting discovery?'

'Last evening. Something happened—it was Madame de Bernine—I am afraid you won't like it, Gervais, but it was no fault of mine. I think I ought to tell you——'

'What on earth——' They had both stopped and he looked down at her in perplexed amusement as she stood before him, her face again colourless save for the vivid red mouth to which, as always, she had applied the only make-up she used; her eyes too big and overbright from lack of sleep, rimmed by the tired blue shadows. She had lost her radiance; she was not, perhaps, so pretty as she was in general, but to Gervais she had never looked more appealing. The hint of fatigue, the touch of fragility in her appearance woke an instant response; all his masculine protective instinct was aroused and he experienced an almost overwhelming desire to take her in his arms, hold her fast, never let her go. A shattering emotion—his hands closed sharply at his sides. He had become increasingly fond of her, admittedly, but this was the first time—it must also be the last.

'Go on, Lora.' He forced a quizzical note. 'What have you and Tante done that I will not like?'

She told him of how she had said something to his mother and aunt about her argument with Lucienne, and what Tante had said.

'Ghislaine happened to be close beside us and he instantly asked if I would like to see the tunnel. I was surprised, it was rather abrupt, but I said I would like to and went along with him. Then he explained why he sort of—bounced me. To stop Madame from saying any more in the midst of all that crowd. He said neither you nor Lucienne would be pleased. I'm sorry, Gervais, since you are keeping the engagement secret, but I couldn't help it and I promise it is safe with me.'

'It doesn't matter in the least, your knowing, Lora,' Gervais returned, 'although Tante overstepped in saying what she did. I suppose she spoke inadvertently; the good aunt occupies herself unduly with our affairs and she resents Lucienne's attitude.'

'Lucienne's attitude?'

'It is Lucienne who does not want it spoken of, and naturally I respect her wishes. I am sure, however, that she would never have minded your being told, but actually it did not occur——' he hesitated.

'You mean it was none of my business.'

'I hope you will not misunderstand me when I say no, it wasn't.'

'I understand perfectly. Only—what is Lucienne's objection? It seems too extraordinary, being engaged to you and not wanting to tell anybody.'

'It is not an official engagement, which in France, is a serious and binding affair. She does not wish, as yet, to be bound to that extent. There has been an understanding between us for years; her parents and my mother planned it when we were children.'

'Your mother? Are you going to marry each other because your parents want it?'

'Not at all,' he said hastily. 'I am merely explaining the circumstances.' Lucienne and I have been very happy to fall in with our elders' plans, but she made this condition.

She wanted a year or two of independence, to put her education to some purpose by taking a post in Paris. She is very spirited and has a modern outlook. Her parents are also liberal and gave their consent. Otherwise, she and I would have been married before this.'

'And you—you didn't mind?'

'I accepted the situation and agreed with Monsieur and Madame Tessier that it was better 'o let Lucienne—' he smiled—'get it out of her system. She would never have been content; Paris was an obsession with her.'

'And how long—when do you expect——'

'Lucienne is under contract for another six months or so. After that——'

'She will be content?'

'I believe—I hope so.'

'I still can't see,' Lora said, 'why there has to be all this secrecy. It seems so—unnecessary——'

'If she were openly affianced,' Gervais explained, 'she could not go away as she has done without causing endless gossip and censure. It would be unpleasant for both of us. In fact, impossible.'

'And she prefers to go and take a job,' Lora began irrepressibly, then caught herself up. 'I beg your pardon, Gervais. I should not have said that.'

'It's all right, Lora. Lucienne and I understand each other.'

'Yes, of course.' Lora drew a breath. 'And, even though it is unofficial, may I congratulate you, Gervais? I do, with all my heart. Lucienne is a darling. You are a lucky man.'

'Thank you. I am, indeed.' He gave her a quick, oddly troubled glance but she did not see it; she was looking down at her hands whose fingers had begun to lace and interlace. Then she said:

'I had forgotten, I must go back at once to catch Jean before he goes into Stc. Anne and give him my list; some cakes and things for tonight.'

They went back, walking fast now and in silence; there

seemed nothing more to say. When they reached the stepping-stones he offered her his hand but she declared she could manage by herself and crossed the stream without slipping. They hurried on through the wood and Gervais left her at the clearing.

'*À bientôt, Lora.*'

'You are coming—tonight?'

'Yes. With Francine.'

'*À bientôt, then.*'

There was always an influx of men at the Dower House during week-ends; husbands with sleeping-out passes and a number of younger officers who drove to and fro in their jeeps. At Lora's suggestion, Mrs. Howard had instituted what she called 'social evenings' on Saturday nights, to which an invitation was extended to their French friends. It was all easy and informal; the younger people danced or listened to variety programmes on the radio in the drawing-room; tables for bridge and canasta were set up in the library and there was a buffet in the dining-room. Not many of the elder French people took advantage of this hospitality, but several bridge addicts, including the Tessiers and Monsieur Marsan, were delighted to come and enjoy a few rubbers with skilled players such as Colonel Howard and some of his senior officers. There had now been three of these evenings, all highly successful; tonight would be the fourth. Gervais had attended on each of the former occasions, as had Lucienne; both, somewhat to Lora's regret, joining the card players.

Tonight, they joined them again while Lora remained with the youthful contingent, but this time she had no regret, or so she told herself. It was much better as it was; yet for all that she was restless, wondering if Gervais would come in later on; he had done so last Saturday and they had had a dance together. She hoped he would not, this evening, yet found herself listening and watching for him.

After the clear, fresh morning, the evening had drawn in

very warm and still. The young people drifted out of doors at intervals; Lora presently saw Francine going out with three or four others. Donald was one of them, of course; well, there was no harm in that. Anyway, she said to herself with a faint resurgence of that earlier bitterness, Gervais was here; he could look after his own stepsister.

Captain Maitland was asking her to dance; he was an expert performer and one of Lora's favourite partners. She danced with him and they had a second; then she went with him to the buffet. When she came back she noted, with a touch of disturbance, that Francine was still missing; a moment or two later Donald Carey appeared and signalled her from the doorway. She hastened across to him.

'Is anything wrong, Don?'

'Come out here.' She followed him into the deserted entrance hall.

'Look,' he said. 'Francine and I were over in that piece of bush—I guess you know how things are with Francine and me, Lora—I had my arms around her and that old witch, that black snake——'

'Black snake!'

'The widow woman. She must have been spying, she grabbed hold of Francine, called her I don't know what and marched her off. I couldn't do anything, the poor little kid was scared stiff and I didn't want to make a row and have everyone hear. I'll go to the château tomorrow and make everything all right; I can't very well go at this hour, the countess might be in bed. But maybe you'd better ask her brother to come and speak to me.'

'No. Not tonight. I'll get hold of Gervais and send him after them—Francine mustn't be left to that woman—come early tomorrow, Don.'

'Okay. You know best.' He was annoyed by the contretemps but clearly unperturbed.

Lora went swiftly to the library.

'Gervais, I'm sorry to interrupt your game, but may I speak to you, please?'

'Certainly.' He set down his cards. 'Will you take my

hand, Munroe,' he said to one of the officers who were watching the game.

The other did so and Gervais and Lora left the room.

'What has happened?' Gervais demanded.

'It's Francine. Your aunt came upon her and Donald Carey out in the garden—and has dragged Francine off——'
'What?'

'It's perfectly all right,' Lora said breathlessly, 'Donald will explain tomorrow—but you must go at once, Gervais. That fiend of a woman—get the child out of Madame de Bernine's clutches.'

Gervais gave her one of his lightning glances and grasped her arm so that she winced with pain.

'You'll come too. You have known of this—now we'll hear the truth.'

'Very well. Wait——' she wrenched herself free and ran to the drawing-room.

'Suzettel'

'*J'y suis. Vous désirez, Lora?*'

'Please tell Mrs. Howard that Francine is not well and Gervais and I are taking her home.'

'I will tell her. Is it something serious?'

'No, just a little upset.'

Lora ran back to Gervais. He took her arm again in that vice-like grip and hurried her out of the house.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When they reached the château they saw that the salon lamps were still alight and heard the voice of Madame de Bernine declaiming. Gervais strode swiftly through the hall and into the great sombrely furnished apartment; Lora followed, pausing on the threshold to regain her breath and survey the scene.

Madame la Comtesse sat upright in her high-backed chair below the towering mantelpiece, gazing in stupefaction at her sister-in-law who, seated on the opposite side of the hearth was pouring forth her tale. Francine, white-faced, her childish mouth sullen, the blue eyes frightened, stood at bay before them. Lora felt a surge of pity for the child, mingled with exasperation at the whole unnecessary proceeding. Such a ridiculous fuss——

‘Gervais,’ the countess exclaimed, ‘thank heaven you have arrived. I was going to send for you—Angele has just disclosed—I cannot credit it——’

The widow eyed him with malignant triumph.

‘A disclosure indeed. This abandoned girl in the arms of a young American—I warned you but you would not listen. I told you repeatedly that she was getting out of hand and you refused to take any steps. Now you see the result.’

‘The result is something I do not as yet see clearly,’ he rejoined crisply, ‘and have come to discover for myself.’

‘Then you know of it?’ his mother demanded. ‘Lora also? Is it common gossip already?’

‘No one knows except Gervais and myself,’ Lora said hastily. ‘Donald Carey told me what had happened and I told Gervais. There is nothing wrong, countess——’

‘That,’ Gervais interposed, ‘is a matter of opinion. At the moment, Lora, you will have the goodness to reserve your own.’

She flushed scarlet and sent him an outraged look.

'Nothing wrong,' the widow shrilled. 'Listen, Gervais. I was feeling very solitary this evening and eventually, although it was somewhat late, decided to walk over and look in at the Dower House for a cup of coffee and a chat with Madame Howard, as one is requested to do on Saturday evenings. As I approached the copse at the side of the house I saw two figures enlaced. I asked myself if my eyes deceived me but alas, I was not deceived. The two were Francine and the Lieutenant Carey. Embracing in the dark—my own niece—behaving like some miserable village slut——'

'I was not behaving like a slut!'

'What else? Allowing this man such licence to amuse and indulge himself—one knows too well the ways of these Americans——'

'If you please, Tante.' Gervais made a restraining gesture. 'Let me handle this. Francine, will you explain how it happens that you were out in the dark alone with Lieutenant Carey?'

'I was with him because he—we——' her voice caught. 'Because I love him and he loves me,' she finished in a burst.

'Love him,' the countess ejaculated. 'You scarcely know him——'

Gervais gave her a glance and his mother fell silent.

'You have been with him alone on other occasions, then?'

'A—few times.'

'Where?'

'In our woods. We—went for walks. There was no harm in it.'

'If you thought there was no harm, why have you not informed us?'

She looked down, bit her lip, and brought out desperately, 'Because I knew you would forbid me.'

'Did the lieutenant know you were meeting him secretly?'

'Yes,' she murmured, her head still bent.

'Yet he continued to meet you—and has made love to you?'

'Yes.'

'Francie, Francie,' the countess's voice held a thrill of pain. 'I cannot believe it of you. To behave like this, behind our backs, the child we have so cherished——'

'Maman——' Francine lifted her head, was about to go to her stepmother when Tante intervened.

'Why should you not believe it, Louise? For my part, it does not surprise me. Have I not reminded you all along that she has bad blood? The child of such a mother, a woman who was no more than a *fille de*——'

'*Abbb*——' Francine sprang forward, arms extended, fingers curved. She leapt at her aunt; Gervais caught her as the gleaming little nails were within an inch of the widow's flat cheeks.

'Francine! *Que fais-tu?* Are you mad?'

'There,' Madame de Bernine cried. 'You see. The savage action of a gutter creature. A reversion to type.'

'I'm sorry,' Francine gasped. 'I didn't mean—but she shall not say such things—she shall not——' and collapsed in a storm of violent sobbing.

'What is all this?' Nanon came running in. 'What are you doing to her? Give her to me.' She snatched the girl from Gervais, pressed the racked little figure to her breast and stared fiercely at the others. 'No, you need not tell me, I have heard all. And it is small wonder that she wished to scratch out the eyes of *Madame la veuve*.'

'*Tais toi, Nanon*,' Gervais thundered. 'You forget yourself.'

'If I forgot myself, Monsieur Gervais, I appear to be the only one who remembers and cares for this child. To say so vile a thing in her presence——'

'I stated a simple fact,' Tante said. 'She inherits from her mother.'

'*Ab, pour ça*,' Nanon retorted, 'let us at least thank *le bon Dieu* that she has not inherited the malice of her aunt.'

'Louise, do you allow me to be subjected to this insolence?'

'Nanon,' the countess commanded, dutifully rather than rebukingly, 'leave the room.'

'If Madame desires. I will take Francine upstairs; she is

in no fit state to be further tormented.' Francine was still violently crying.

'Yes,' the countess assented, 'take her up. She has told us the truth and there is nothing more to be done tonight. Calm her, Nanon; give her a *tisane* with a sedative. I will come presently.'

Gervais put a hand on his stepsister's shoulder.

'Don't cry like that, little one. You will make yourself ill.'

'I am not—from the gutter——'

'No, *bébé*, no. You were beside yourself for an instant. Forget it now; it is finished.'

'Is that all you intend to say to her when she has tried to attack me?' Madame de Bernine demanded wrathfully.

'That is all. As for you, Tante, it was inexcusable to speak as you did.'

'What? Am I to be reproached as if I, and not this vicious child were at fault?'

'It was inexcusable,' he repeated, 'and is not to occur again.'

His voice was stern, his handsome young face harassed. Despite her indignation, Lora felt an hysterical desire to laugh, mingled with a pang of sympathy for him. It wasn't easy, at twenty-eight, being head of this household of women.

With her arm still about her nursling Nanon muttered a defiant good night and took Francine away. Madame la Comtesse leant back in her chair and drew a heavy sigh. The widow said:

'You are exhausted, Louise.'

'I am more than exhausted, Angele.'

Gervais turned to Lora, speaking now in English.

'How long have you known of this? Did you encourage these meetings?'

'I did not. I knew nothing, as I have already told you. I suspected they might be seeing each other, but——'

'You suspected,' the countess echoed. 'And did not consider it your duty to tell me? You connived, in effect, at this deception?'

'A poor return,' Tante contributed, 'for the kindness you

have received in this house.' She could not speak English but had grasped the gist of what they were saying.

'There was nothing to tell,' Lora replied. 'I was not in their confidence. It was only my instinct, I might have been mistaken. And it did not seem——' her voice quickened, 'any business of mine. Francie is in her own home with you, Madame, and her brother to look after her. I am merely a guest, who arrived a complete stranger, and it wasn't for me to come to you with any vague ideas about your step-daughter.'

'I can see,' the countess conceded—for Louise was always just—'how it appeared to you. Nevertheless, in such a case as this, you were misguided. To let Francine go on, undeterred, secretly meeting a young American, risking God alone knows what——'

'But that is just what I didn't do,' Lora retorted. 'If it had been one of the other men, one of the wild lot who are never invited to the Dower House, I *would* have come to you or Gervais. As it was, Francine risked nothing. There was no need for this trying scene which has so upset you, Madame. If Gervais had let me speak in the beginning instead of shutting me up I could have saved you, and Francie too.'

'Saved us?'

Lora nodded.

'The poor child was so cowed by her brother's magisterial questioning and the attitude of all three of you, she gave an entirely wrong idea. Donald Carey hasn't been amusing himself, as Madame de Bernine put it. He is in love with Francine, seriously, and is coming here tomorrow to tell you so. He has excellent credentials—you can find all that out from Mrs. Howard who knows him and his family intimately. She speaks very highly indeed of him.'

'He is serious!' A look of incredulity, followed by one of distinct relief crossed the countess's face. 'You do not mean he wishes to marry her?'

'He did not tell me in so many words, but of course that is why he is coming.'

'Then at any rate there has been no disrespect, he has not misjudged, looked upon her lightly because of her conduct.'

'Of course he hasn't!' Lora's eyes, bright with suppressed temper, softened to a look of amused compassion. 'Is this what was troubling you? In Donald's view, Francine's conduct was that of any girl with an ounce of spirit. He's American, remember, and does not realize the importance of French conventions.'

'Well——' the countess rose from her chair. 'You have relieved my mind on one count. Gervais, I want a word with you; come to my room in about ten minutes' time; I will see how the child is first. You will remain here for the night, Angele?'

'Thank you, Louise. I am too much shaken for any further effort and will retire at once.'

The elder ladies left the room; Lora, with a frigid *bonsoir* to Gervais, followed them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At ten o'clock next morning an Army jeep came tearing along the avenue and drew up with a squeal of brakes at the entrance to the château. Lieutenant Carey blithely descended and jerked the wrought-iron bell-pull.

'Is the countess at home?' he inquired as the double doors were opened to him.

'Madame is occupied,' Nanon replied. 'Monsieur Gervais awaits Monsieur le Lieutenant. *Par ici*, Monsieur,' she led the way to the salon and announced the visitor.

'Good morning, Carey.' Gervais came forward, shook hands with the other and motioned him to a chair.

'I guess you know why I'm here,' Donald said as his host sat down facing him. 'I've been wantin' to come before but little Francine was nervous and kept coixin' me to wait another day and another day. I'd made up my mind I wasn't waitin' any longer and was just tellin' her so last night when that ole hellcat—pardon me, your aunt—jumped us. I asked Lora Russell to get hold of you but she said I had better leave it till this morning. She's told you? And Francie has explained how things are between us?'

'I have more or less grasped the essentials of the situation,' Gervais replied, 'but I should be glad of an explanation from you. I needn't say that this has astounded my mother and myself; we were not aware that you and my stepsister were anything but the most superficial acquaintances. It now appears that you and she have been meeting surreptitiously—hardly the thing to do, Carey——'

'You're tellin' me,' Donald rejoined cheerfully, 'but accordin' to your sister it was the only way we *could* meet. I didn't know about these rules and regulations when I first asked her for a date; it was only later on I discovered she was doin' somepin irregular and scared of bein' found out.'

'Having discovered it, why did you continue?'

'Why?' Donald smiled in his slow, attractive fashion. 'Because by that time I was in love with Francine and could see it was the same way with her.'

'It didn't occur to you that the correct thing was to——'

'Come clean?' Donald supplied. 'It sure did occur to me but Francine just about threw a fit, declared that you-all would forbid her to see me again and might even complain to the Colonel. I said the hell with it, what was wrong with two people's fallin' in love, but she wouldn't hear of it and I gave in for the time bein'. I figgered a couple or more weeks wouldn't matter and it might be a good idea to try and get to know you and the countess and have you know me. But things weren't workin' out that way and I decided to stop all the secret stuff. I never did like it,' Don finished simply.

'It is a pity you ever embarked upon it. If you had—come clean—in the beginning, a good deal of unhappiness would have been avoided. Don't think I blame you alone; Francine knew, far better than you could, that she was doing something we would not countenance. I can't understand what possessed her.'

'She was—she is—in love with me. That's what possessed her. We want to get married. You know nothin' about me as yet, but I'll give you the low-down now and the Colonel will confirm me.'

'I am sorry, Carey. It is quite out of the question.'

'Out of the question? I can't take that, de Beauvoir. Refusin' me before I've even stated my case. I can give your sister everythin' she's had here. My family——' rapidly he sketched the status of his father, the family home, the life he could offer his bride.

'What's more, I'm cabling Dad, and if I ask him he'll hop a plane and come over and meet the countess and speak for himself. You'll see there's nothing to worry about: Francie'll be treated like a queen. An' I—I'd cut off my hands if it would please her; I'll make her happy——'

'My dear boy.' Gervais had been in no friendly mood

when he received the younger man but Donald's straightforward speech, his innocent confidence and obvious devotion for Francine disarmed him. 'I don't for a moment dispute your eligibility or that you would do all in your power to make Francie happy. But it isn't the marriage for her and I cannot consent. I am her guardian, responsible for her welfare and I know what I'm talking about.'

'You want to marry her to someone else, don't you. That de Boncourt guy. I'm not saying anythin' against him, a man whose hospitality I've accepted and who was mighty nice to me in his own home. But why should you force her to marry a man she doesn't like when there's another man she loves, who can do just as much for her? I don't get it. It just doesn't make sense.'

'That is not the point at issue. We should never force Francine against her will. At the same time, we will not allow her to marry and go with you to America.'

'Why the heck not? I suppose it sounds a long way off to you people but in these days of air travel—besides, what's that got to do with it? Francie and I love each other and it's our business, not yours and your mother's. We have a right to live our own life in our own way——.' It was young America speaking, with all its passionate conviction of the inalienable rights of youth.

The man who had been brought up in a country where youth in general is less stridently aware of its claims and, for the most part, still defers to the experience and authority of the elder generation, eyed him indulgently.

'That is your doctrine, I know, but Francie cannot have her own way in this instance. I regret, more than I can tell you, that this has happened and am only thankful it has gone no farther. You have known each other so short a time——'

'You suggestin' we'll get over it? I won't, and neither will she, and I'm not taking no for an answer.'

'I sincerely trust you will both get over it, sooner than you expect. As for my answer, it is final.'

'You mean that? You're goin' to do this to us for no reason at all?'

'I mean it. As for reasons, I have good ones but they would not convince you and I won't waste my time or yours expounding them.'

The other was silent for a space, twisting the gold fraternity ring on his left hand round and round. Then he said:

'Seems there's nothin' for it but to wait until Francine's of age.'

Gervais suppressed a smile.

'I shouldn't advise that. Even in the unlikely event of your both being of the same mind a number of years hence, my mother and I would still oppose this marriage. And I can tell you frankly, Carey, my stepsister will never marry you or any man if it means defying and a break with us. You may find this hard to believe, but I assure you it is the truth.'

'You got her hypnotized, huh? Okay, de Beauvois, I guess you've won. I——' the bitter young voice faltered. 'I won't be seein' her, I'll stick to camp and apply for a transfer. Can I speak to her now for a minute? Sort of say good-bye?'

'I think not. Francine is—upset—and it would only distress her.'

Donald drew a breath.

'She—cryin'?'

'She has been crying.' Gervais rose; he was finding this very painful. Poor youngster with his baffled, hurt face and unhappy brown eyes. He had come in, not cockily, but with such cheerful assurance, convinced that what he and Francine desired would as a matter of course be granted, incapable of conceiving anything less. Now he sat defeated, with the shocked, stunned look of one who has run full tilt into a stone wall where no such wall was expected and should never have been.

He reached for the cap he had brought into the room with him, turned it over once or twice as if not quite sure as to what it was. Then he stood up.

'Right. You're the boss. I'll be gettin' along.'

As the two young men crossed the hall a small figure came flying down the staircase.

'Don—Don——'

He started, glanced at Gervais, then rushed to meet her. Francine, wildly weeping, flung herself into his arms.

'Honey—Honey——' he held her fast. On the floor above a door opened, someone came along the upper hall, swiftly retreated.

Gervais stepped forward.

'Take her,' Don said. He kissed Francine's mouth, kissed her again, surrendered her to her brother and ran blindly out of the house.

Lora came cautiously from her bedroom; it was she who had hurriedly retreated a short time earlier, having caught a glimpse of the scene below. The hall was empty now; she slipped softly down the stairs and out through the open doorway. With a face set and eyes wide with pity for the two distracted young creatures she made her way to the edge of the ruined enclosure from which there was a view of the stables with their charming irregular roofs and ancient clock tower.

There was no necessity today for going to the Dower House; on Sundays she was free to please herself. She had lingered in her bedroom, knowing that Donald Carey was coming to plead his cause, half inclined to hope that the countess and Gervais would consent. Madame had seemed not only relieved but impressed by the discovery that the young man was 'serious', and Don could present a good case. He had quite as much to offer as Ghislaine de Boncourt, and Francine was in love with him. Surely they would not break her heart, simply because they were set upon this other marriage?

Now she knew they had done so and Lora's own heart was hot with resentment. The sight of those two, Francine's anguished tears, Donald's face, had been too much for her. She hadn't cried on her own account when she learned that

Gervais was to marry Lucienne, but for a few irresistible minutes today she cried for Francine.

She had brought her sketching book out with her; there was very little time these days in which to apply her talent and Lora seized every opportunity. She was not in the mood for it but forced herself to begin. The spell of creative work soon absorbed her; everything was forgotten but the moving pencil and the sketch forming beneath it. She had been sitting there on the sun-warmed grass for more than an hour when, with a sense of being watched, she looked up and saw Gervais. He was wearing breeches and riding-boots and had evidently been on his way to the stables when he caught sight of her.

'Good morning, Lora.'

'Good morning.' She spoke stiffly.

'May I stay and smoke a cigarette? Or do I interrupt?'

'I have done enough.' She closed the folder. He offered her his case; she shook her head. 'No, thanks.'

He lit a cigarette and perched himself negligently on a bit of broken wall. Already out of charity with him, his casual air increased her antagonism.

'I expect you know I have had young Carey here,' he said. 'It has been a difficult morning.'

Glancing up from under her lashes she saw that in spite of his nonchalance he looked tired and strained. The thought crossed her mind, 'He is too young for all this responsibility', but she stifled it at once, hardening her heart against him.

'For Francine and Donald,' she returned, 'it has been rather more than difficult. I saw them in the hall, poor children. You refused to consent——'

'Naturally I refused to consent.'

'Why naturally? They are madly in love and there is nothing against Donald——'

'Nothing whatsoever,' he assented coolly. 'But Francine is not going to marry him.'

'Because you have other plans for her. Because of a family arrangement that suits the elders on both sides. I can

understand your mother, of course; she has her fixed ideas and traditions. But for you—*you*—to take such a stand——’

‘Why not I?’

‘You know very well why. You are an Englishman, Gervais, and——’

‘Please,’ he interrupted, ‘do not let us enter into all that again. We have discussed it exhaustively. And in this case it is quite irrelevant; Francine is a French girl, remember.’

Lora flushed and sat silent.

He blew a smoke ring, regarded it with interest, and said:

‘Do you really think this marriage would be for Francine’s happiness? She is deeply devoted to my mother and myself, to her home, her friends and the way of life here in this valley, which is the only life she knows. Try to imagine her married to Carey, transported to America, away from us all among total strangers whose ways are not our ways.’

‘Other girls, French girls among them, have gone just as far away and been perfectly happy.’

‘I am speaking of Francine, not other girls. Within six months—within six weeks—she would be desolated and frantic to return home.’

‘So you think. You forget that she is in love with Donald Carey. You give her no chance, calmly break her heart——’

Gervais made an impatient movement.

‘She is only seventeen. Her heart will mend.’

‘What a callous thing to say.’

He smiled.

‘Callous, but true, my dear Lora. They will both recover from their youthful fever, and quickly, little though they believe it at the moment.’

‘Is that what you think of—love? They will recover! How? If they continue to see each other—and they are bound to meet at parties and so on——’

‘They will not meet. Francine returns to her convent tomorrow.’

‘Her convent! Are you making her take the veil?’

‘I am not making her take the veil,’ Gervais replied in a tone of obvious control. He explained that Francine was to

attend the 'old children's' reunion, a yearly event which fortunately was taking place in two days' time. Her going would cause no surprise in any quarter.

'And she will prolong her visit,' he concluded, 'until I see fit to bring her back again.'

'You are sending her away—shutting her up—just because she has fallen in love——'

Gervais's tired face hardened, the dark eyes began to smoulder.

'I am sending her away,' he said succinctly, 'because I will not risk her remaining here while young Carey is in the vicinity.'

'You are afraid they will start seeing each other again in secret? Donald wouldn't do that.'

'He has promised, certainly, to stay at camp and apply for a transfer. But——' Gervais shrugged. 'Human nature is—human nature. He and Francine have deceived us once. I don't intend to be deceived a second time and am removing the—temptation.'

'So this is Francine's punishment. Banishing her——'

'I am banishing her because it is imperative to get her away. She has behaved badly and needs—not punishing—but a salutary lesson. Her conduct has shocked and pained my mother severely. As for the child herself——' Gervais flung the stub of his cigarette to the ground and slipped down from the wall, looking implacably at the girl who sat on the grass before him.

'As for the child, she is overwrought, in no state to continue her usual social activities; she shrinks from facing anyone as yet. It is also necessary, at all costs, to separate her from Tante for the time being; I cannot be always at hand to protect her from Tante's reproaches.'

'Yes—I can see——' Lora began.

He swept on, ignoring the interruption.

'Finally, if Francine remains at the château she will be in a constant state of nervous tension, knowing that Carey is near at hand, wondering whether she may encounter him, thinking of nothing else. In the convent she will perforce

relax, she is exceedingly fond of the Mother Superior and the other nuns, she will be safe and quiet and can recover there as she could not possibly recover here. She'll come to her senses, appreciate what home and family mean and return in a very different frame of mind. Believe me, Lora, I know my stepsister and what is best for her.'

Lora's colour had risen again during this long and forcibly delivered speech.

'I'm sorry, Gervais, I didn't stop to think of all this.'

'No, you didn't. But that did not prevent your leaping to your invariable conclusion. From the first, you have consistently refused to allow me a decent quality. You arrived with your preconceived, insular and priggish notions——'

'I am not a prig!'

'Tell me another word for it. You set yourself in judgment, you impose your opinions, you attempt to dictate to me in the matter of my ward——'

Lora sprang to her feet.

'Don't speak to me like that. I told you I was sorry, admitted I was mistaken——'

'It is not the first nor the second time you have misjudged me and been sorry. I have been patient, heaven knows, but I have had enough of your mistakes and your repentances.'

'Very well,' she flashed, 'don't say any more. I have had enough of your rages, your French temperament.'

'*Bon*. It is mutual, then.'

They gazed inimically at each other, Gervais ablaze with one of his characteristic furies, Lora's lips parted, her young breast sharply rising and falling.

Suddenly, as angry eyes defied angry eyes, something quivered in the air between them; Lora's flushed face paled and simultaneously a tinge of colour rose in Gervais'. For a breathing-space neither moved, their gaze still locked; then Lora's lashes fluttered, she put a hand nervously against her throat.

'Lora——' he took a step towards her.

'I—I'd better go,' she said dazedly.

'Yes.' He too seemed dazed. Then he pulled himself

together. 'Forgive me,' he said. 'I apologize. My wicked temper——'

'I asked for it. What you said was true.'

'Perhaps. But I shouldn't have said it. Shall we wash it all out? Everyone is rather—overwrought, today.'

'Everyone,' she agreed in a shaken voice. She had betrayed herself—but so had he. Oh, so had he. For a breathing-space their defences had gone down; now they must go up again. Gervais's manner left no doubt on this score and she took her cue.

She bent to pick up her sketch-book from the grass; as she did so the sound of horses' hooves came across the stable yard. Ghislaine de Boncourt cantered towards them. His bold grey eyes went from one to the other and with his appalling lack of tact he exclaimed:

'Do I intrude at an awkward juncture? You look at the peak of a royal row, you two.'

'No, species of imbecile,' Gervais returned pleasantly. 'Miss Russell and I do not indulge in rows. *Eh bien*, what brings you here?'

'You may well ask. *Ces sales Américains*. Not content with poaching our trout by normal methods they have now taken to throwing hand grenades into the river.'

'Hand grenades!'

'That, or charges of gunpowder. There they float, the fish, in their dead scores. I came to see if anything of the sort had happened in your waters or at Les Chenes. I tried to telephone you but the lines are silent.'

'The storm on Friday night brought the wires down on our side of the valley. But this is beyond everything! I haven't had any report on my own stream and know nothing as to what may have occurred in the Tessiers' section.'

'I'll ride over, then, and find out. We want to send as large a deputation as possible to make representations to the Commanding Officer.'

'I will come with you. I intended going to Les Chenes in any case this morning.' Gervais hurried away to saddle Colombe. Ghislaine dismounted, the bridle over his arm.

'How is Francine?' he asked. 'I stopped at the Marsans'—they too have suffered from these miscreants—and heard she had been taken ill.'

'It was nothing,' Lora replied, 'just a small upset. Too many cakes, I imagine. What a dreadful thing this dynamiting or whatever it is of your fish.'

'An unspeakable thing. For my part, I wish we could smoke them out, these Americans. It is always the same; where they appear, trouble follows. A misfortune that they ever came.'

'I can't go all the way with you there,' she said lightly. 'I owe them a debt of gratitude. If they hadn't come, I shouldn't be here myself.'

Ghislaine grinned.

'That only confirms my contention that trouble follows in their wake. *N'est-ce pas?*'

There was no mistaking the implication of this; Ghislaine knew. With a flash of insight she saw now that he had guessed on the evening of the party at Bellegarde. This was why he had so abruptly taken her to see his tunnel; to save her from exposing herself to the countess and Madame de Bernine.

She stared at him, momentarily speechless; Ghislaine of all people, ruthless, unfeeling——. He smiled, less disconcertingly, and gave her a reassuring little nod.

'*Soyez tranquille,*' he said and turned to mount Fureur as Gervais and Colombe appeared. The two young men bade Lora *au revoir* and rode off side by side.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lora stood motionless until the two riders had disappeared and the sound of horses' hooves died in the distance. Then she drew a long breath and pushed the hair back from her temples, pressing hard as if to steady her racing thoughts.

Soyez tranquille. Ghislaine's meaning had been clear. Your secret is safe with me.

He had spoken in his customary fashion, smiling his characteristic smile; unmoved, without sentiment—yet kind. It did not seem so remote a possibility now that he might some day develop into such a man as his father. She felt a rush of warmth towards him and a pang of regret, wishing that their acquaintanceship had not begun with a mutual antagonism; she would have liked to have him for a friend. It was too late now; if he had been kind, it was a purely impersonal reaction. She smiled faintly; what a curious turn of events that she should be thinking this way of Ghislaine de Boncourt.

Then she forgot him; her hands went nervously up to her forehead again as she relived that instant when she and Gervais had faced each other, hating each other, and a veil had been abruptly lowered.

What now?

The answer confronted her, inescapable; Gervais himself had supplied it. She must pretend, as he would pretend, that the involuntary revealing look had never passed between them. But it had passed; she could not be mistaken; she had seen what she had seen.

'I suppose,' she thought, 'the sensible thing would be to go straight home. Make a clean break——' but even as the idea arose she hotly repudiated it.

She didn't want to go home, she could not bear to leave the valley. She would have to leave, of course, at the end of September when the *pension* closed—her heart twisted at the

thought. But sufficient unto the day; she wasn't going a moment earlier. She loved it so, all of it, loved everything and everybody connected with it—Gervais or no Gervais, she was staying. Besides, she couldn't let the countess down like that, strand her at this stage with no one to manage the *pension*. She *had* to stay; gratitude, duty and common decency demanded it.

'So that is that,' she told herself and picked up her sketching block and went back to the château. As she reached the upper hallway the countess came out of Francine's bedroom, closing the door behind her.

'Ah, it is you, Lora. Have you heard——'

'Yes, Madame. Gervais has told me. How is Francie?'

'She is quieter now and has accepted the fact that she must go away for a time. But it is all very painful.' Madame spoke crisply and with something less than her usual affectionate indulgence towards her young guest. Lora, feeling as if she had been rebuffed, said quickly:

'Would you like me to spend tonight at the Dower House? I expect you and Gervais do not want anyone—outside—this evening.'

She had never before felt an outsider in the château and hoped the countess would refute the suggestion, but Louise grasped at it.

'Is there a room vacant?'

'Oh, yes, the one above my office. I always keep it in reserve for a special emergency.'

'Then if you will, my dear, I shall be glad. I still have a great deal to discuss privately with Gervais. And I should prefer you not to see Francine before she goes tomorrow morning. It might upset her again, you understand.'

Lora understood. She and Donald were connected in Francine's mind and the younger girl knew that the elder was in full sympathy with her.

'I will keep away,' she promised, telling herself she must not feel hurt, the request was perfectly reasonable.

'And you will, of course, say no more than is absolutely necessary about what has occurred. There is bound to be

talk, but I hope we may at least conceal Francine's conduct. Gervais thinks the young man can be trusted not to reveal it.'

'I am certain he won't reveal it,' Lora replied, 'nor, naturally, will I.'

With a nod of dismissal the countess hurried downstairs; Lora packed a small dressing-case and departed at once for the Dower House. When she came to the woodland she hesitated, then set the case down on a mossy dry stump and went on to the river, crossing the bridle-track that led to Les Chenes and strolling slowly along the edge of the water. Suddenly a figure appeared on the opposite bank; her startled eyes recognized Donald Carey. He too looked startled but he waved to her and crossed the shallow stream.

'Hallo, Lora.'

'Hallo, Don.'

There was an instant of awkward silence, then he said:

'I guess you know what's happened.'

'Yes, I know. I'm so sorry—not that it helps——'

He gave her a twisted smile.

'Thanks, Lora.'

'What are you doing here?' she asked gently.

'I just came to—sorta have a last look. Where Francie and I——' he stopped.

'Have you been over in those woods ever since you left the château?'

'Oh, no. I been talkin' to the Colonel, he's spendin' the week-end at the *pension*.'

'Are you to be posted to some other unit?'

'The Colonel's goin' to see what can be done. He's given me leave right away. I hate quittin' the outfit but I know darn well what would happen if I stayed. Francie'll come creepin' down here like I did just now—maybe cryin'—and I'd get to thinkin' about it and nothin' on God's green earth could keep me from comin' to find her.'

'There is no chance of that,' Lora returned. 'Not for some time, at any rate. She is being sent to her convent tomorrow.'

'Convent! What for? They goin' to make a nun of her?'

'No. They seem to have had the same idea as you, Don, and are taking no chances.' "

'The hell they aren't. They ought to be shot. I told her brother I'd get out——' he clenched his hands. 'They're doin' this to get back at her, wallin' her up—*Francie*. Sent away among a lot of black ghouls——'

'It is her old school,' Lora put in hastily. 'And they are not ghouls; she loves the nuns and they will be kind to her.'

'She'll break her heart. And I can't do a thing about it. Back home—anywhere else—I wouldn't give in like a whipped pup. I'd make a fight for it. But that Gervais de Beauvoir—he's got me beat.'

Lora nodded.

'It would be no use, trying to fight Gervais.'

'You've said it. Well, I'll be gettin' along to camp. You comin' back to the château now?'

'No,' Lora spoke dryly. 'I'm staying the night at the Dower House. The countess doesn't want me to see *Francine* before she goes.'

'It's like that, huh? She knows you——' he broke off as the rhythmical thrum of approaching horses was heard and two riders came into view. 'The pair of them,' he said in an indescribable tone.

There was no time to avoid the encounter; they came on at a fast canter and he caught Lora's arm and drew her closer to the bank to allow them to pass on the narrow track.

Gervais was in the lead; he made a gesture of recognition and gave Lora one of his lightning glances, a look of surprise and hauteur that stung hot colour to her cheeks. Ghislaine saluted with his crop, stared hard for a split second at Lieutenant Carey. Then they were gone, disappearing around the bend that led through a wooded way to the château grounds.

'So now you know,' commented Donald who had not missed Gervais's expression. 'Put you in your place, his lordship de Beauvoir, on the wrong side of the fence, beside me. Well, I guess you won't be losin' any sleep over it; you're one of us, not one of them.'

'I won't lose any sleep,' Lora agreed, but inwardly she was crying, 'I don't want to be on your side of the fence. I want to be one of *them*.'

If only they had not appeared at this unfortunate moment. Gervais had guessed that she had been sympathizing with the rejected suitor, condemning the de Beauvoir attitude. She did condemn it, and she was desperately sorry for Don; the sight of him standing there bitter and defeated in the path of his rival, forced aside as Ghislaine swept arrogantly by on his superb great bay had wrenched her heart. But she passionately wished that she had not been discovered here beside the rejected and defeated one.

They walked back to the Dower House, collecting Lora's bag on their way; he said good-bye to her at the entrance and went on to the courtyard where his jeep was parked. She watched him go; poor heart-broken boy. Then she went indoors and up to the room where she was to spend her night of exile.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Madame la Comtesse had foreseen, the story immediately leaked out. Lieutenant Carey's predilection for the lovely little French girl had been a *not* open secret among the American contingent; the rejection of his suit was known to everyone in the *pension* by the evening of the same day and within twenty-four hours the news had percolated to the French residents.

There was considerable talk, but not of a damaging kind. That Francine had committed the grave misdemeanour of meeting a young man secretly in the woods was not known and never suspected. The tale merely ran that the lieutenant, after the headlong fashion of his race had fallen in love at sight with the countess's stepdaughter, had applied for her hand, been refused, and Francine wisely removed for a time from his orbit. No blame was attached either to her or her impetuous young admirer but the valley was conscious of distinct shock and at once closed its ranks.

No fresh invitations were issued from the châteaux; on the ensuing Saturday evening no French girl appeared at the Dower House. There had, in any case, been very few of them who did come, and only two or three families had as yet extended hospitality to the invaders. The young Americans were scarcely affected by this obvious withdrawal; they had responded cordially to the French overtures but had found the community very dull upon the whole. One had always to be on one's best behaviour, watching one's step, and there was no getting anywhere with the girls.

Lora, for her part, saw it with a tightening heart, this concerted stand of the valley people against those who came in from outside. Not a single member of the community took it otherwise than for granted that the de Beauvoirs should *ipso facto* refuse Francine's American suitor. Not even

Lucienne Tessier whom Lora had thought might be on Donald's and Francine's side.

'Poor little Francie,' Lucienne said, discussing the affair with Lora a day or so after it had occurred, 'but of course it was impossible. She must marry Ghislaine.'

'Simply because the parents desire it? I imagined that you, who are so independent, you who left home and struck out on your own, would not subscribe to these out of date customs.'

But Lucienne, for all her sophistication and independence did subscribe.

'It is difficult for you to understand,' she said to the English girl, 'but I assure you it is not a bad custom, Lora. It is—how can I explain—a firm foundation. Here, in the valley, it is the foundation of everything. Families are held together, properties enlarged and kept intact—'

'Properties,' Lora echoed impulsively. 'Beauvoir and Les Chenes adjoin, don't they. Is that why——?' she checked herself. 'I beg your pardon, Lucienne, I did not mean to say that. It just slipped out—forgive me.'

'It is all right, Lora. Gervais has told me that you know about us and how it happened, owing to Tante Angele's indiscretion. I do not mind in the least. You are asking if he and I are to marry in order to connect the two properties?'

'I asked what I had no business to speak of, Lucienne.'

'You shall have your answer, none the less,' Lucienne smiled. 'It is true that Madame la Comtesse and my parents wish very much that some day Beauvoir and Les Chenes shall be incorporated. But I can assure you I am not being sacrificed upon the family altar. Did you really imagine that this was the case?'

'No, I didn't,' Lora returned in the same light vein. 'I don't think marrying Gervais could entail any desperate sacrifice. He's a—a very charming person.'

Lucienne's vivid face softened to a look of tenderness.

'Ah, Gervais,' she said. 'He is unique. There is no one like him.'

'You love him,' Lora murmured, irrepressibly.

‘Dearly. I have loved him ever since I was old enough to toddle along behind him.’

Lora gazed down at the ground, her eyes veiled by the silky lashes. They were in the château garden; Lucienne had come over to dine with them. Gervais, who had escorted his stepsister to the convent was not yet returned.

‘Shall we go in?’ Lucienne suggested after a short silence. ‘I think it is time to join Madame in the salon.’

As the ensuing days passed, Lora became increasingly ill at ease. Gervais still delayed, he was taking the opportunity to visit friends in the vicinity of the convent, and Madame de Bernine considerably moved into the château to keep her sister-in-law company.

Lora pursued her customary round, spending her days at the *pension* and coming back to the château to dine and sleep. But with Francine gone this nightly return took on an almost embarrassing aspect, there was no longer a young girl who eagerly awaited and welcomed her and with whom she could foregather after dinner. The countess continued kindly but Lora, sensitive to atmosphere, was aware of an indefinable change in the air; the old happy sense of ease and at-homeness deserted her. She was sure that Madame exonerated her from all blame, but she suspected that the elder woman harboured a slight grievance none the less, a feeling that if Lora had not mistakenly kept her own counsel, all this distress could have been avoided. Tante Angele undoubtedly felt so and took small pains to conceal it.

Lora began to dread the hours spent in company with the two ladies and wondered uncomfortably whether they might be finding her constant presence, evening after evening, an infliction; a blight upon the confidential gossip of which they had an inexhaustible fund, a third person, not of their generation, of whom they could never be rid.

When Gervais returned, the situation would be even more uncomfortable—to put it at its mildest. With that unspoken thing between them, how could they meet each other every night in the intimacy of the family circle?

'That is why he is staying away now,' she thought. 'To give us both time—and to show me——' her pride was up in arms. She wanted to show *him* that there was no need for him to keep away but she didn't know how this was to be accomplished. Short of going home to England—and she *couldn't* do that. . . . Lora's pretty face had lost its radiance, held a look of strain. 'What shall I do? What *can* I do?'

The problem was resolved for her. The *pension* cook contracted influenza; the youthful assistant cook needed the supervision and moral support of Miss Russell. Madame la Comtesse, apprised of the temporary dislocation said briskly:

'Then I think, my dear, the time has come for you to take up your quarters at the Dower House. After all, the manageress's place is the *pension* itself, *n'est-ce pas?* I would not suggest it while you were still, in effect, a stranger in a strange land but now that you are established and have made such good friends among the American women it is another thing.'

Lora caught her breath. She had been anxious to escape, she was thankful for this simple answer to what had seemed an unanswerable question, yet she felt as if she had been slapped. Madame *did* want to get rid of her.

'I ought to have thought of this, myself, long ago,' she said. 'I can't imagine why I never did; it has been very good of you to have me here at the château all this time.'

'We have enjoyed having you and you will, of course, continue to come in without ceremony. But now we make this more practical arrangement. *Alors*, if you will put your belongings together, Jean will take them down.'

Lora went off to do so, once again telling herself she must not be hurt. She had come to the château, not as a guest but to undertake a job; she could have had no complaint if the countess had relegated her to the *pension* from the beginning. As it was, Madame had shown her exceptional kindness and hospitality.

'And she did say I was to come in without ceremony——'
Nevertheless, as she climbed the great stairway and walked

along the familiar hallway to her room she felt that she was being thrust outside and the château doors closing to her.

She crossed to the window at which she had knelt, in the darkness, waiting for the sound of Gervais's returning step; the window below which she had more than once been awakened by Gervais's voice. She knelt down now and gazed out across the valley, the valley that wanted no strangers. Presently a tap sounded on the door; she sprang up, called *Entrez* and Nanon came in.

'*Vous partez, donc, Mademoiselle Lora.*'

'Only as far as the Dower House, Nanon.'

'So Madame has told me. I have come to help you pack. It will be better for you there among that lively company; this is a cheerless house for a young girl with the little one gone and Monsieur Gervais also.' The old woman opened the *armoire* and began to collect Lora's frocks. 'I cannot remember,' she continued, 'when Monsieur Gervais has absented himself for more than a night or two. One will be glad to see his return.'

Monsieur Gervais, thought Lora wryly, will return as soon as he hears that Mademoiselle Lora has left the château.

Whether or no this constituted his reason, he had arrived home when, a day or so later, she came to submit the weekly accounts to Madame la Comtesse. As always on these occasions, she went directly to the office on the ground floor. The door stood open.

'Good morning, Madame,' Lora said, entering the room, then stopped abruptly. The countess was not there; Gervais rose from behind the big desk.

'Good morning, Lora.'

'So—you are back,' she said, rather breathlessly.

'I got back yesterday afternoon.'

'How is Francie? Did you see her again before you came home?'

'No, I did not think it wise to do so. I have had a good report of the child from the Mother Superior. Is young Carey still about?'

He spoke with some stiffness; she remembered that his

last sight of her had been as she stood condoling with the American youth, a sight he had viewed with obvious displeasure.

'No,' she answered with equal stiffness, 'he got leave at once and, as he promised you, has applied for a posting. Mrs. Howard tells me that the Colonel has seen to this; Donald will not return to the aerodrome.'

'*Tant mieux.*' Gervais with a shrug dismissed young Carey. 'I understand that you have moved into the Dower House, Lora. Are you comfortable there? Was it necessary?'

'Perfectly comfortable, thank you. And it is much more practical. All that going back and forth—never even knowing whether or not I would have to dine there—your mother has been very good to put up with it for so long.'

'My mother has not been inconvenienced. And it was intended, from the first, that you should live at the château.'

'But things have developed since then. The countess did not know, and neither did I, that I was capable of taking full charge. Now that I can and do run the *pension*, my place is naturally there. It is easier and less complicated.'

She meant to make it very clear that the arrangement was one which she herself preferred.

'I see.' She caught, or believed she caught, a suggestion of relief in his tone as if he, also, preferred the new arrangement. 'Well, so long as you are content——'

'I am quite content. I have some good friends, you know, among the Americans. And we have been very gay; going over to dances at the camp; they have got a really marvellous jazz band together—recruited from all ranks——'

'The camp? You ought not to go to those affairs, Lora.'

'Why not?'

'Because they—because there is too much drinking and the evening is apt to become a veritable orgy. I attended once, and found it more than sufficient.'

'That is only among a certain proportion. Not the ones I know, those who come to the Dower House.'

'But the others are there, none the less. It is no place for you.'

'I go with my own party. I am quite safe.'

'I am not questioning your safety. But I don't like it.'

'I'm sorry, Gervais. But you really haven't anything to say about it.'

'It is not my business?'

'Frankly, no. Unless you are implying that by going I am in any way letting the château down. But since Mrs. Howard is always with us I hardly think you have any cause——'

'I implied nothing of the kind. I only meant that I dislike intensely the thought of your being in rowdy company, exposed to possible unpleasantness. Now don't tell me that is my French blood speaking; I am sure that if you had a father living, or a brother, they would feel as I do.'

Lora was inclined to believe that they would, indeed, and she felt a thrill of joy at this manifestation of Gervais's concern. But she hardened her heart. He had denied that revelation, denied Lora herself; he was not free to do otherwise and she could not logically reproach him. But he couldn't have it both ways. If her role was to stand aside, then she was not going to submit to his wishes. Moreover, she was, and knew it, no longer to be included in the countess's social circle. They had relegated her to the Americans; very well, she would seek her own amusements among them. She had no intention of sitting twiddling her thumbs alone while the rest of the women went gaily off to the camp.

She looked up defiantly and saw the dark eyes regarding her with a troubled expression.

'Lora?' he said, in that way of his. She had hardened her heart, but at this it nearly failed her. At the same moment the telephone that stood on one end of the desk shrilled loudly.

Gervais lifted it from its cradle.

'Yes, it is I, Lucienne.'

A brief conversation ensued, regarding some proposed expedition.

'*Bon,*' he said in conclusion. 'It is understood.'

To Lora he explained that a number of friends, the Tessiers and Marsans among them, were about to make an annual excursion for a week or ten days to Biarritz; Lucienne had called up to see whether Gervais were yet returned.

'We shall leave tomorrow,' he said. 'I will try to persuade my mother to come; it will distract her after this anxiety on Francine's account.'

Biarritz, thought Lora. Surf bathing, basking on the sands, dances at evening in the big hotels, dances that would not become orgies—Gervais and Lucienne——

'How nice,' she said.

'Yes, it will be agreeable.' He looked at her again in that troubled manner. 'And about the camp, Lora? Will you not reconsider?'

'I'm afraid I won't, Gervais. You must please allow me to—judge for myself.'

Then the countess hurried into the room.

'You have brought me the accounts, my dear? I was delayed. Gervais, Jean is in the courtyard, he wishes to speak with you.'

Gervais departed; there was no sign of him when the young manageress presently went back to her *pension*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lora, wearing a crisp little scarlet poplin blouse and the full skirt with its huge scarlet dots which she had worn on the day of the wedding, stood on the edge of the highway at the entrance to the de Beauvoir estate. The long road stretched deserted as far as the eye could see; there was neither sound nor movement in the spreading fields. In spite of her gay attire she looked a forlorn little figure standing there, the only apparent living thing in all the shimmering green countryside.

Presently, in the distance, a speck appeared, resolving itself into a small open car, coming from the direction of Ste. Anne. She watched it approach and recognized Ghislaine de Boncourt at the wheel. He waved a hand and she waved back, expecting him to drive on, but he drew up before her.

'What are you doing here, Miss Russell?'

'Waiting for the post bus.'

'The post bus? But why?'

'I am going in to Ste. Anne.'

'And is there no one at Beauvoir to drive you in? Surely Gervais or Jean or someone——'

'Gervais is not at home. Didn't you know? He and the countess left yesterday with some other people for Biarritz.'

'I had not heard. So you are alone in that great house with only old Nanon? It cannot be very gay.'

She explained that she was no longer living at the château.

'Is it so?' Ghislaine's bold eyes gazed curiously at her. 'And so you take the post bus to Ste. Anne. You go to do some shopping?'

'No. I am having a holiday, an afternoon off, and I thought I would try to make a sketch of the church.' She was carrying her sketching block.

'That does not sound exhilarating to me,' he commented.

'I'll *goûter* at the café,' she said, gaily and absurdly; she was beginning to feel unnerved by his steady stare.

He continued to stare, then opened the door of the car.

'You will do better to come to Bellegarde.'

'To Bellegarde!'

'If you wish to sketch, there are plenty of subjects to be found there.'

'It—it's very good of you,' she stammered, 'but I couldn't possibly—your family are not expecting me——'

'They will be most pleasantly surprised.' He stepped out into the road. 'Enter, if you please.'

'But——' she drew back.

'My faith,' he cried, 'am I to lift you in? Be sensible, *je vous en prie*. You cannot tell me you prefer a solitary afternoon in Ste. Anne to the company of us others.'

She began helplessly to laugh.

'I don't prefer it—I should like very much—if you are sure it will be all right.'

Ghislaine grinned.

'You should set a higher value upon yourself. Bellegarde will be enchanted.' Without further ado he handed her in and took his place beside her.

'*Ça va?* You are comfortable?'

'Perfectly, thanks.'

Lora tightened the gypsy scarf around her head and leant back in the low-slung seat. The car, a roadster, she judged to be of pre-war vintage, but it had been kept in excellent repair and ran smoothly and swiftly.

'I hardly recognize you in a car,' she said. 'I always think of you and Fureur as one and indivisible.'

'I prefer to be mounted,' he replied. 'This is still to a great extent a riding community. I drive only when necessary.' He explained that he had been executing sundry commissions in Ste. Anne and must make a detour of several miles in order to deliver a package to an elderly relative. 'A detour which, on Fureur, riding across country, would be no more than half a mile. So you see why it is that we cling to our

old-fashioned way of getting about. You will not object to a fairly long run?’

‘Of course not. I shall enjoy it. It’s very nice of you to have brought me at all.’

She was astonished that he should have bothered to do so, touched by his kindness and more than a little apprehensive as to how the family at Bellegarde would view her arrival.

‘I could not pass by and leave you standing on the roadside. Since it has pleased those others to exclude you——’ he shrugged. ‘And so you have left the château, Miss Russell. One had understood that, as the young niece of Madame la Comtesse’s friend you were to remain there. Under Madame’s wing, in effect.’

‘That was the original plan, but now we find it more practical for me to live at the Dower House.’

‘It was Madame’s suggestion? And Gervais approved? That you should leave the amenities of the big house and instal yourself in a room at the American *pension*?’

‘Madame did suggest it and I thoroughly agreed. It is more convenient than going to and fro.’

‘Convenient,’ he echoed derisively. ‘Considering that the Dower House is about six minutes’ walk from the château—are you no longer on happy terms with the countess?’

‘Oh, yes.’ She was beginning to feel frayed under this cross-examination. ‘We simply decided that this was a better arrangement.’

‘A sudden decision. To turn you out, after all these weeks—is it perhaps that Madame feels you have exerted a subversive influence in the affair of Francine?’

Lora flushed. Did he himself suspect this?

‘Madame could not possibly think that,’ she said. ‘I had nothing whatever to do with it. I have never spoken one word to Francie on the subject. She herself can confirm me—if anyone asks her——’

‘If you tell me so, it is sufficient. Nevertheless, you were in favour of it. You will not deny that?’ Ghislaine spoke in his uncompromising fashion but without rancour.

‘It wasn’t for me to be in favour or the reverse. I had no

right to intrude upon what was no concern of mine and never attempted to do so.'

'Yet your sympathies were with the lieutenant. You were condoling with him when Gervais and I rode past that morning. You remember?'

She flushed again, remembering all too well. But she answered honestly and loyally:

'I sympathized, yes. I am very fond of him and was very sorry for them both. These things happen; people can't help falling in love——' she broke off, biting her lip. He gave her one of his wicked glances.

'As who should know, if not Miss Russell. *Eh bien*, you did not encourage Francine, then.'

'Encourage her! On the contrary. I knew nothing about it, except the little I saw for myself. Neither Francine nor Donald confided in me.'

'*Bon*. It is understood. I had thought perhaps—but I was mistaken. So much the better. *Attention*—this is the place where I must leave the parcel.' He stopped the car at the gates of a small villa. 'With your permission—I shall have to go in but will not keep you waiting long——' he sprang out, collected the parcel from the boot and ran up the path.

Lora watched him as he rang the bell and was admitted. He had questioned her mercilessly, but he appeared to bear her no resentment for her confessed sympathy with his rival. Whatever his faults, small-mindedness was not one of them. For the first time she began to ponder on his reaction to the unfortunate affair; she had never before given Ghislaine's side a moment's consideration, merely looking upon him as the chief obstacle to Francine's and Donald's happiness. Now she wondered what he felt about it. Was he hurt? Did he love Francie or had he simply acquiesced in his parents' wishes? She had no clue to his feelings and, lacking his own ruthlessness, could not ask.

One thing, however, she did know. Her relegation to the Dower House, the fact that Madame had suggested it and Gervais accepted the move without apparent protest, shocked Ghislaine's sense of what was correct. He had even

betrayed disapproval of their all going off to Biarritz, leaving Lora to her solitary devices. 'He was wrong there, of course; she had to remain at her post.

'But it's rather sweet of him——' she caught herself up with an amused little laugh. Ghislaine sweet! What a word to apply to that young man.

There was, at any rate, something very sweet in the look she gave him as he came back to the car; a spontaneous warmth and friendliness such as she had never before accorded him. She had turned in the seat as he approached and now faced the sun; he gazed at her as if newly struck by her appearance and said, with characteristic frankness:

'Of a truth, you have eyes like no one else. Has anyone told you that they change colour and the pupils enlarge and contract as do those of a cat?'

'I have been told,' she answered, without thought. 'Gervais always calls them cat's eyes.' Then she caught a sharp breath and the cat's eyes were abruptly veiled by the long, soft lashes.

Ghislaine got in beside her and started the engine.

'Gervais,' he observed as the car moved away, 'might have been better employed than to engage himself with your *beaux yeux*. For my part, I find his conduct indefensible.'

'No, no,' she protested, startled. 'He has never given me any reason to imagine—it was just my own idiocy, building something up out of nothing.' This was less than the truth, but Ghislaine must not suspect the whole truth.

'I do not accuse him of acting with intention,' Ghislaine returned. 'Naturally he is unaware of having aroused your—interest. But Gervais de Beauvoir is an exceptionally attractive man, and to have allowed so easy and intimate a relationship to develop between yourself and him, leaving you ignorant of the fact that his own interest and affections have long been fixed—it was badly done.'

'He only treated me as any man would treat a young guest in his house. And he wasn't free to tell me, he had given his word to Lucienne. But I have found out—in time——' her voice was a little high and breathless, 'and there's no harm

done. I'm not giving it another thought and, thanks to you, no one else dreams of how silly I have been.'

'*Grâce à moi?*' he echoed.

'You haven't forgotten what you did, that evening at Bellegarde. I didn't grasp it at the time, but I realize it now and am very grateful.'

'Oh that. *Pas de quoi, mademoiselle*. I was happy to be of service. I saw that you had received a severe shock——'

'Did I look—did I show it so plainly?'

'You looked altogether ghastly,' he replied with unflattering candour. 'Like a little clown, a Pierrette, your face chalk-white except for the bright red lipstick and your eyes quite dead.'

'Heavens,' cried Lora. 'What a description. I'm sorry I asked.'

'It was the affair of an instant. I spoke, and you were yourself again. You behaved admirably, as a matter of fact.'

'Thank you. And now——' she smiled resolutely, 'let us forget it. It's all over.'

His answering smile was sceptical, but for once he restrained his mischievous tongue.

'Bravo,' he said briefly and turned his attention to negotiating a hairpin bend, for they had ascended a steep hill to the villa. The turn accomplished, he pressed his accelerator and the small car sped down a long slope through the widening valley to Bellegarde.

As they reached the estate and swept in under the great archway Lora knew a moment of trepidation, but her fears were unfounded. The family were gathered on the terrace, preparing to go about their various avocations after the customary rest that followed their substantial midday meal. Ghislaine, who had lunched in Ste. Anne, presented his companion with a flourish and buoyantly explained that he had come upon her waiting for the post bus and proceeded to kidnap her. His action was warmly approved; Lora had made a very good impression on her former visit, the two Messieurs being greatly taken by her pretty face and manner, the ladies agreeing that she was a young girl *bien gentille, tout*

à fait comme il faut. They received her now in the kindest possible fashion and the three younger ones welcomed her with genuine enthusiasm. Visitors were rare at Bellegarde; it was not the habit of the valley community to 'drop in' on one another, and Lora's unexpected advent was a pleasurable break in their routine.

The place was humming with activity, everything working up to the grand climax of the vintage. The four young people carried Lora off to inspect this and that, presently turning towards the stables.

'Do you ride?' Armande inquired.

'Not what you would call riding,' Lora smiled. 'I have never hunted, for instance. But I have done a certain amount and am very fond of it.'

'We must give you a mount, then,' Ghislaine said. 'Would it please you to ride this afternoon? Armande can lend you a pair of breeches and boots; you are of a size, you and she.'

'I would love to.'

Armânde's breeches and boots proved a trifle large, but did very well; the de Boncourts saddled their own horses and Ghislaine brought out the little Spanish filly for Lora.

'She has a gentle temper and has been well trained,' he said.

'Yes, I know,' Lora responded, remembering that he himself had been training the jennet for Francine. She cast him an involuntary, conscious look but he did not appear to notice it.

'If you please——' he held out his hand. She placed a foot upon it and went lightly up.

They rode through the estate in order to show it to Lora in its entirety. At the far end they ascended a slight ridge; the land on the other side dipped again for the distance of half a mile or so, then gently rose in a series of chestnut-covered slopes. There was a house in this sunny, enclosed space; a renovated old farmhouse, one-storied and rambling, delightful with its rough-cast walls, blue shutters and lichen-tufted tiled roof. It stood embowered in an orchard and

possessed its own small farm; the river made a shining loop around the whole and several tributary little streams meandered down from the hill-sides, crossing the meadows like strips of silver ribbon.

'What an adorable place.' Lora instinctively drew rein and spoke to Ghislaine who rode at her side; the others were some way ahead. 'Does it belong to Bellegarde? Is this still your property?'

He explained that it belonged to his father and would eventually be his own; an arrangement made by the two Messieurs when they jointly inherited the estate. He was farming the land himself, intending to specialize in early market-produce and presently put up a number of glass-houses.

'And you will live there, when——' she began thoughtlessly, and stopped.

'I shall remove there when, and if, I marry,' he replied coolly. 'But that lies in the uncertain future.'

This was an opening she could not resist.

'You mean, you no longer expect to marry Francine?'

'That lies with Francine herself. If she comes to me and asks to be taken back——'

'She is not likely to do that! But I am sure, in time, she will be guided by what the countess and Gervais think best for her.'

'*Merci.*' Ghislaine shook his head. 'It is for Francine herself to make the approach now. And since, as you say, she is unlikely to do that—*alors, c'est fini.*'

Lora gazed in silence at the charming old house in its lovely setting, then at the fine young figure erect on the great bay beside her.

'Francie is mad,' she said.

'*Comment?* Mad?'

'To want Donald Carey when she could have had—you.'

'*Tiens——*' His mocking smile flashed out but she saw a momentary softening in the bold eyes. 'I thought your sympathies were entirely with that other. You are so fond of him, and have had no love for me.'

'You never gave me much cause,' she retorted. 'Until just lately.'

'And now? You have changed your opinion, Lora? It is permitted to call you Lora? We have stood on ceremony long enough, I think.'

'I think so too, Ghislaine. Yes, I have changed my opinion.' She gathered up her slack rein and they rode on down the ridge.

They made a wide circuit and enjoyed some good gallops, Lora acquitting herself well and earning the approval of the troupe. After a couple of hours or so they returned to the house where they found the elder members again assembled and a table set with a tea tray and a loaf of *pain d'épice*. Lora was soothed; the sense of having been thrust outside was less acute. She felt at ease and at home in this open, sunny place under its wide skies, with these forceful, cheerful, uninhibited people. They could be disconcerting; the younger fry, at least, had their hard and callous streak, but one knew where one stood with the de Boncourts. What they thought, they said; if they appeared to like you, then you could rest assured that they did.

When she presently suggested that it was time to take her leave they refused to hear of it; she must remain for dinner and Ghislaine would drive her back later in the evening. But at ten o'clock, just as he was going out to fetch the car a violent storm, characteristic of the district, broke without warning.

'We shall have to wait until it ceases,' he said. 'It would be foolish to drive in such a tempest.'

But it did not cease, it went on and on, the thunder rolling back and forth across the hills, rain falling in torrents. At length the elder Madame de Boncourt said:

'This is evidently going to keep on for hours. You must stay the night, my dear.'

Lora, embarrassed, but realizing that it would be absurd to insist upon being driven home in such weather when there was no imperative reason for her to return, gratefully accepted.

The storm lashed itself out and a brilliant morning followed. The young guest was drinking her coffee in bed when Armande knocked and came in carrying the breeches and boots she had lent the other girl yesterday. She explained that her brother had thought Lora might like to ride over to Beauvoir instead of going by car: 'We can make a little parcel of your skirt.'

Lora agreed with much pleasure; some time later, having thanked and said good-bye to her hospitable friends she set off on the jennet with Ghislaine and Fureur.

They took the bridle-paths through the rustling, sparkling woods; the paths down which Lora had so often watched Gervais disappear. They turned into the de Beauvoir estate at an angle which led past the small villa occupied by Madame de Bernine and saw the widow herself trudging in the direction of the château. She wheeled around at the sound of the horses and stood staring; the riders politely drew up.

'Toi, Ghislaine?' she exclaimed. 'Et Lora? Par quel hasard——'

'Bonjour, Madame,' Ghislaine said. 'A beautiful morning, *n'est-ce pas*, after the wild night.'

She disregarded this.

'You have been riding together? How is that?'

'We have just come from Bellegarde,' Lora informed her. 'I spent the afternoon and evening there yesterday and when the storm blew up Madame de Boncourt kindly asked me to stay the night.'

'You went to Bellegarde! Deserting the *pension*?'

'I was not needed at the *pension*, Madame, and decided to take a day off.'

'And decided also to call on the de Boncourts?' Tante's gimlet eyes probed the girl's face. 'Jean drove you over?'

'No.' Lora longed to point out that she was not accountable to Madame de Bernine for her actions, but she couldn't be rude to the countess's sister-in-law. 'I was waiting for the bus to Ste. Anne when Ghislaine came along in his car and suggested my going to Bellegarde instead. Which I was very happy to do,' she finished with delicate emphasis.

'I see. One did not know you were a horsewoman, Lora. Is not that the little mare which has been trained for Francine, Ghislaine?'

'It is Celeste, the filly I have been training,' he assented in his coolest tone. Tante Angele made a tut-tutting sound.

'One should be very sure of whom one allows to mount her, then. A young animal is so quickly spoiled. The hands of an amateur——'

Ghislaine smiled. Lora never knew whether he had already formed his intention or spoke from sheer devilment.

'Mademoiselle Lora is no amateur. On the contrary, I find she has such good hands that I am leaving Celeste here in Gervais's stables and asking Mademoiselle the favour of exercising and completing her training. *Eh bien——*' he tightened his rein and touched Fureur with his heel. 'We must continue to the *pension*. Good morning, Madame.'

They rode off, leaving the widow still staring.

'Ancient species of sorceress,' Ghislaine commented when they were out of earshot. Lora laughed aloud.

'But——' she said, 'what possessed you to say that? You can't mean to leave Celeste here——'

'I mean exactly that, if you will grant me the favour, Lora. The jennet is a lady's mount and it is time she was ridden by one. It will not incommode you?'

'Incommode me! I'd adore it. But surely Armande or Annette——'

'My sister and cousin have their own mounts. In any case, I do not want the filly ridden by them; they, in truth, might spoil her for a less accomplished and more nervous rider. They cannot resist what Gervais calls circus tricks.'

'Well, I certainly can't teach her any circus tricks. But what will Gervais say about your leaving her here?'

'Gervais will have nothing to say. He has contracted to buy Celeste and I am making delivery, *tout simplement*.'

'But wouldn't it be better to wait—he won't be home until after next week-end at the earliest. If he comes back and finds me riding Francine's filly——'

'He will be only too glad that there is someone to exercise

and prepare her for her future owner. I have already explained that it is time and more than time that Celeste should be handed over to a mistress.'

'Then——' Lora wanted very much to have the interest and joy of riding Celeste—'if you will explain to him that you asked me to do this——'

'I will tell him. And you need not fear any objection on his part.'

She did not really feel any apprehension on that score. Ghislaine's argument was irrefutable, she herself was definitely fulfilling a need in taking over the jennet for the time being and, in addition, she was sure that Gervais would be glad for her to have this pleasure.

'Did you bring any riding kit with you?' Ghislaine asked.

'No, I didn't.'

'I think you will find what you need in Ste. Anne. Meantime, Armande will be happy to have you use these things of hers.'

'Thank you. It is awfully kind of you both. I am simply thrilled, and I'll take great care of this darling little creature.'

She still wondered whether the suggestion had impishly occurred to him while the widow pursued her inquisitive probings; it did not seem at all unlikely. But however it had arisen, the idea had obviously seemed good to him, and she was content to let it rest there.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Celeste was installed and during the ensuing week Lora made friends with her, brought her lumps of sugar, was taught by Marius, the groom, how to saddle the docile little animal and rode her twice each day; in the morning before breakfast and again in the late afternoon. On two occasions Ghislaine appeared and rode with her, and once she had the company of the whole troupe. They seemed to have taken her to their hard young hearts; she was twice during this week invited to dine at Bellegarde and most willingly accepted. More than once, as she came back to the château after a solitary ride she encountered Madame de Bernine; they exchanged only a brief, polite greeting but Lora saw, with no little amusement, that Tante Angele acidly disapproved of the new development.

In spite of her pleasure in Celeste and the heartening friendship of the de Boncourt family, Lora was restless and far from happy. She longed for Gervais to return, ached for a sight of him, yet nervously dreaded that very thing. On the Saturday evening there was another dance at the camp and she attended it with the other women; she did not greatly enjoy these somewhat boisterous affairs, but it was better than staying alone with her own thoughts.

She had made herself very pretty in the leaf-green frock and little matching wreath which she had worn at the *pension* housewarming and was at once surrounded by a number of young officers, all in lively spirits. With a sudden accession of recklessness she gave in to the general gaiety, dancing every dance, going at intervals into the bar with this one and that. She had sense enough not to drink too much, but drank sufficient to give her a sense of false well-being, her eyes shining like jewels, a rose-pink flush in her cheeks. As the evening wore on it became decidedly rowdy; she began to think, 'This is worse than usual', and wished herself

well out of it, but she hid her feelings and continued to laugh and chatter and dance; she could not leave until the others did.

She was sitting at a table in the bar with another girl and two hilarious youths when she felt a touch on her shoulder. She turned, and gasped.

'Gervais!'

Gervais it was, who stood behind her.

'May I have a word with you, Lora, if your friends will excuse you?'

The two young officers had risen, none too steadily, to their feet.

'Sit down,' they urged, 'join us.'

'Thank you,' Gervais smiled, 'but I only looked in for a short time and must get back. Will you come, Lora?'

Her knees were weak, she pressed her hands upon the table. Gervais drew out her chair and somehow she stood up. He took her arm and led her swiftly from the room.

'I am taking you home,' he said. 'Get your wrap and say good night to Mrs. Howard.'

She was so astounded that automatically she obeyed, collecting her wrap and explaining to Mrs. Howard that Monsieur de Beauvoir had offered to take her home and she, feeling rather tired, had accepted. Then she rejoined Gervais and they left the Mess and he put her into his car. She sat in bewildered silence while he drove through the camp where work was going on under the glare of arc lamps. As they turned into the main road he said stiffly:

'I hope you were ready to leave.'

She had pulled herself together now, and replied:

'A fine time to ask; you gave me no chance. Yes, I was more than ready. But what in the world are you doing here? I thought you were to stay in Biarritz over this week-end and probably longer.'

'The rest of the party are staying. I drove back this afternoon and got in a couple of hours ago.'

'What brought you back?'

'Business. Some English importers have arrived in Ste.

Anne. I got word and contacted them by telephone and am entertaining them tomorrow at the château.'

'And after driving all that way you changed and came over to the aerodrome——'

'As you see. I have an open invitation to these dances.'

'Yes, I know, but you said once was enough. Had you been there long before you came to the bar?'

'Not long. I had a drink and a chat with the colonel and asked him also to come over tomorrow.'

'You could have asked *him* by telephone——'

'I could. But I had another object in going to the camp.'

To bring me home, thought Lora. To bring me home. A great pang of rapture shot through her, followed by a painful reaction. He shouldn't have done this——

Forcing a light note, she said:

'You came to see if I were behaving myself. Really, Gervais! I'm not an infant.'

'I came,' he retorted forcibly, 'to ensure that at least you reached home safely. I wasn't going to have you driven by some half drunken youngster such as you were sitting with when I found you.'

'That wouldn't have happened. We are all brought back together in a lorry.'

'In a lorry! It is no place for you, that camp is no place for you. You shall not do this sort of thing, Lora.'

'Am I to stay by myself in the *pension*? Doing a cross-word puzzle or getting on with my knitting? The children in bed and asleep and only old Paulette up there sitting-in with them?'

'You can come over to the château.'

'There wasn't anyone *at* the château.'

'Ah, *par exemple*,' he cried, 'could you not, then, remain one evening by yourself? Have you no resources? Is there not a radio to amuse you or a book you can read?'

'I choose my own amusements, Gervais, and it isn't for you to dictate to me.'

'I merely——'

'Please,' she interrupted, 'don't say any more.'

'As you will.'

The stretch of road from the aerodrome to the château was straight and deserted; like most Frenchmen Gervais drove at high speed. A few minutes later they swept into the dark courtyard of the Dower House, the headlamps cutting a white swathe across the cobbles and lighting the old wall with its row of shuttered windows.

'I shall have to go around to the front,' Lora said as he handed her out of the car. 'This door is bolted at night.'

'Is the other left unlocked?'

'No. The key is in a hiding-place. Good night, Gervais, thank you for bringing me home.'

'I will see you into the house.'

'It's quite unnecessary.'

'Nevertheless, I will see you in.'

They spoke as if they hated each other. Lora shrugged.

'Very well.'

They crossed the lighted space to the shadows beyond. The night was clear and starlit but the path around the house, cobbled like the courtyard, was thickly hemmed in with bushes.

'Careful,' Gervais warned, 'those high heels of yours—I should have brought a torch.'

'I can see, I'm all right——' but even as she said it one of the high heels slipped on the uneven stones. Gervais caught her as she stumbled; she regained her balance but he did not let her go. His arms closed around her, holding her fast.

'Lora—Lora——'

'No——' but she gave in, let him strain her closer, her aching heart appeased, her whole being flooded with ecstasy. For a moment they stood so, his head bent over hers, his face against her hair. Then he put her from him—he had not kissed her—and they faced each other, breathing like runners.

Lora was the first to find her voice.

'That was a—crazy thing to do.'

'It was inexcusable on my part,' he responded. 'I don't know what to say to you—I can hardly insult you further by asking you to forgive me——'

'Oh, Gervais,' she was shaken to the core, but pride demanded that she made light of it. 'Don't be so—so French. You didn't insult me; I was wrong, too, I could have stopped you. These things happen—in the dark, after a party. We'll just wash it out. It means nothing.'

'No,' he said sharply, 'I will not have you say that. You know what it means, Lora.'

She set her teeth, began to tremble.

'But you—and Lucienne——'

'I am pledged to Lucienne. I cannot jilt her, shame her——'

'Do you think I would allow you? That I would do such a thing to her, and to your mother and the Tessiers? Repay their kindness by acting like a thief and ruining all they have set their hearts upon?'

'It isn't a question of what my mother and the Tessiers have set their hearts upon. Are you implying—reproaching me again with being—French? Do you imagine that their wishes could weigh in the balance against you?'

'I thought—you would conform——'

'Then you thought wrong, as you invariably do. But Lucienne and I—from the time we were children——'

'I know, Gervais. And she—has the right of way.'

'It is a little more than that. Lucienne is twenty-three; there has been more than one man who would gladly have offered for her and could have given her an establishment quite equal to mine. But it was understood that she and I—it has never occurred to her to consider any other possibility—I must fulfil my engagement, Lora.'

'I know you must. Have I suggested anything else? You don't need to explain——'

'I need,' he retorted, 'to be horsewhipped for what I have done tonight.'

She uttered a shaken little laugh.

'Then I also ought to be whipped. We were both mad

for an instant; now we'll forget and go on as if it had never happened.'

'Do you mean that you still—you do not hate me?'

'Why should I hate you?' Lora's voice was suddenly low and tender. 'You have never been anything but—good to me.'

She put out her hands to him and he caught and held them.

'We'll say good-bye now,' she said, unsteadily, 'and to-morrow start again as—we were. Just friends.'

'Lora—if only I were free——'

'Please, no more. Let me go; don't come with me.'

He lifted her hands, kissed them, and crushed them against his heart. Then she wrenched them away, and with bent head went on along the path. Gervais stood watching until she disappeared around the corner of the house.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lora entered the cool dim stable and made her way to Celeste's loose box. There was no one about; it was not yet six o'clock. She was still shaken by last night's encounter with Gervais, wondering how she was going to face him in spite of her brave words about being just friends, nervously shrinking from the thought of it. She had slept only in fitful snatches and at length, finding further sleep impossible, had got up and dressed and crept out of the house.

She saddled the little mare and led her slowly and as quietly as possible across the yard, then mounted and rode off towards the river. The air was heavenly, fresh and still; early morning sunlight flickered along the track through the green branches; Celeste whinnied with pleasure and Lora's tension began to slacken. She was feeling refreshed when she presently turned back towards the château, her tired eyes brighter and a tinge of colour in her cheeks.

Suddenly her colour deepened, she caught a sharp breath and drew rein. Another rider was approaching; a moment later Gervais and Colombe appeared. With an exclamation of astonishment Gervais drew up also.

'*Mais—comment—*' she saw the familiar expression, the cocked eyebrow and quizzical smile, the look he had so often given his stepsister. Lora's nervousness fled; no meeting could have been better contrived, his amazement at seeing her on horseback superseding every other emotion.

'Good morning,' she said. 'We both seem to have had the same idea, coming for a ride at the crack of dawn.'

'But what on earth—*you*, Lora—riding the filly——'

'I hope you don't mind.'

'I don't mind in the least, but I am at a loss to understand——'

She explained how it had happened, telling him the whole story.

'Ghislaine was sure you would not object, and he was anxious to have Celeste exercised by a mistress who would not teach her circus tricks.'

'He was right. It is just what the jennet needs. But I did not dream—you never told me you could ride.'

'You never asked me.'

'So it was left for Ghislaine——' there was a slight edge, not unlike jealousy in Gervais's tone and Lora's heart gave an undisciplined little jump at the sound of it. 'You and he have become friends, it seems.'

'I am great friends with them all now,' she smiled. 'I've been more than once to Bellegarde while you were away and as a matter of fact am going over again this afternoon. They have been so kind, absolutely taken me under their wing.' She wasn't bitter, there was nothing to be bitter about, but it gave her considerable satisfaction to say this.

'*Bon*,' Gervais responded. 'I am glad to hear it.' But the dark eyes held a look of dissatisfaction.

'I'm doing a series of sketches for them,' she volunteered further.

'*Vraiment*? I was not aware that their tastes ran in the direction of art.'

'I don't think they do, really, but my art is just good—or bad—enough to amuse them. I did one of Monsieur Charles—the sort of thing I did of you and Francie——'

'The way you see him?' Gervais suggested.

'Yes. It came out—though I say it myself—rather marvellous. The family went crazy about it and now they all want to be done. The troupe on horseback—I can't do horses but just give the impression.'

'You can give an excellent impression, as I remember to my cost. As for the de Boncourts, they have been decidedly more thoughtful for you than we others. You could have been riding all these weeks—I regret very much——'

'Nonsense, Gervais. There wasn't any riding home at the château except Colombe.'

'One could have been procured.'

'I wouldn't have had it. I didn't come here to—I came to do a job. I'm only riding Celeste now to complete her training. Are you going on? I ought to be getting home—'

'I'll ride back with you and see how you perform.'

They rode back side by side and he complimented her on her performance.

'Celeste is—literally—in good hands,' he said as he helped her dismount. 'You take her out every morning?'

'Yes. Not quite so early as this. And again towards evening.'

She looked up and met his eyes.

'No,' she said, as if he had spoken, 'we cannot—ride together.'

'I suppose not.'

'You *know* not.' She began to breathe too quickly. Marius, the groom, came hurrying from the stable. Lora took advantage of the interruption to make her escape.

She did not see Gervais again during the few days that elapsed before the return of the Biarritz party. She kept away from the château and he made no attempt to seek her. He was right, the less they saw of each other the better, yet she continually looked for a sight of him, found herself listening for his step, his voice, or the drumming of Colombe's hooves on the forest tracks. She never heard them, never caught a glimpse of horse or rider.

The countess and her friends were to arrive home on Friday evening; on Friday morning Colonel Howard came to the Dower House with a shattering announcement. It had been supposed that the construction of the aerodrome, subject to various delays and frustrations, would take another six weeks or so, but supplies had suddenly been stepped up and, working day and night shifts, the Americans had completed their task far ahead of schedule and were handing over to the French; the camp was already in process of packing up.

The women guests immediately decided to pack up and leave also. They had enjoyed their stay to a certain extent, but had found the place very isolated and lonely; they had

come simply to be near their menfolk and, with the men gone, there was no object in remaining.

'So the *pension* will close,' Lora said.

'Yes,' Mrs. Howard assented. 'Too bad, in a way, but that's the Army all over. Luckily, we are paying by the week. The Colonel is going to see Monsieur de Beauvoir today and explain matters to him.'

'And I,' thought Lora, 'will have to go too. Unless Madame asks me to stay on——'

But Louise wasn't likely to do that. Already she had turned Lora out of the château—for this was what it came to, however much the action had been glossed over on both sides.

'And even if she did suggest it, how could I stay in the same house with Gervais? But I don't want to go. I don't want to go.'

With a heavy heart, a depression shot through by irrational pangs of hope that something might happen so that she would, after all, be enabled to remain, Lora went dutifully to the château next morning to report to Madame. The countess was in her office; not at the desk as was customary but seated on one of the high-backed throne-like chairs which suited her so well.

'Come in, Lora,' she said without preamble. 'This is very sudden news. Everyone decamping at a moment's notice—Americans are truly unpredictable.'

'I am so sorry,' Lora said. 'I know you were counting on their being here for several more weeks. But I suppose one cannot blame them; naturally the ladies don't want to be left when the men are going.'

'No, one can't honestly wonder at their going,' the countess conceded, 'but all the same, it is the sort of general *bouleversement* which I think could only happen when Americans are concerned. *Alors, c'est ça*. Do you know exactly when the exodus is to take place?'

'They pay in advance from Friday to Friday, so I expect they will be going in a week from today.'

The countess nodded.

'Then you will give us the pleasure of spending next weekend at the château and we shall see you safely on your way home Monday morning.'

Lora's heart turned over.

'Thank you, Madame.'

'It is a pity your summer in France should be cut short, but now that the *pension* is closing——'

'Of course,' Lora said quickly. 'I was just going to say that I—I expected to leave as soon as it closed. It has been a wonderful visit, I can't tell you how grateful I am——' despite all her efforts, her voice broke, the hazel eyes were suddenly over-bright, the soft lashes flickered.

'Come here to me, child.' Erect in her throne-like chair, Louise extended her hands. It was a regal gesture and Lora's response was instinctive. She crossed the room and knelt down before the elder woman, giving her own small hands into the large firm ones.

The countess looked steadily at the upraised young face.

'It is for me to express gratitude,' she said. 'You have—I will not say fulfilled my hopes, for you have done infinitely more than I ever hoped from you. The success of the *pension*—and it *has* been a success—is almost entirely owing to your efforts. I have said nothing but I have watched how wholeheartedly you flung yourself into this work, your astonishing initiative, perseverance, unflinching tact——'

'Oh, Madame—I have loved every minute of it.'

'That does not alter the fact that you have done well, Lora. And perhaps you think I am making a poor return in sending you home instead of keeping you here to complete your holiday.'

'I don't think that—I would never——' Lora floundered.

'It would be a great pleasure to keep you,' the countess continued. 'You have endeared yourself to me, more than you know. But for your own sake it is better that you should go. Living and working at the Dower House was a different matter, but to come back to the château—I think you understand me?'

Lora flushed and paled.

'I have seen, of late,' the other continued, 'how you feel towards Gervais. I have not been unduly concerned, trusting to your own good sense to combat and overcome your weakness.'

'I have been—sensible,' Lora breathed, thinking: 'She has guessed about me but, thank heaven, she does not suspect that it is the same with him.'

'Yes. You do not lack character. And these things pass; once you are at home again this fleeting *penchant* will dissolve like a dream. But to remain here——' the countess smiled, 'that, in truth, would not be sensible.'

'No, it wouldn't.' Lora summoned a faint smile in return.

'So now the air is cleared between us,' Louise said with a resumption of her normal brisk manner, 'and we shall speak no more of the matter. You have brought the accounts? Let us go over them, then.'

At half past four on that same day Lora was seated on the vine-shaded terrace of the café in Ste. Anne. They were holding a final party at the *pension* this evening and the young manageress had discovered, belatedly, that they were out of various things such as olives and salted nuts. Fortunately there was a car available, the baby Citroen which Mrs. Howard had lately acquired. Lora borrowed it and drove into the town, making her purchases and then, as she always did when she came in to shop, turning her steps towards the café.

The last time, she thought, looking out through the sun-dappled leaves at the little *place*. With an ache of nostalgia she recalled the first time she had sat there, wondering what awaited her at the end of her journey. She remembered a horseman clattering past, a nonchalant figure with a fine-drawn, dark-eyed face who had aroused her momentary interest, and a great wagon rumbling by with the name *Château de Beauvoir* brightly painted upon its side, startling and thrilling her. She recalled another day when she had brought Francine here and Donald Carey, shy but persistent,

had come to speak to them; and presently Ghislaine de Boncourt, haughty and inimical, had arrived.

How much water had run under her bridge since those two occasions. Now she was hopelessly in love with that unknown rider and he with her; Ghislaine, her former enemy, had become her friend; Donald was gone, not to be seen or heard from again, Francie languished in her convent, paying the stern price of disobedience and deception. And Lora—at this hour, nine days hence, Lora would be completing the first lap of her journey home to London.

‘No,’ she thought desperately. ‘No. It is too bad to be true.’ But it was true, for all that.

She was roused from her painful musings by the sound, so familiar, so bound up with the life of this beloved valley, of horses’ hooves. Her heart leapt and her colour rose as once before it had done at the same sound in this same place and, even as had happened then, it was Ghislaine de Boncourt who drew up, not Gervais.

With a gay salute he dismounted, tethered Fureur and joined her.

‘A pleasant surprise, Lora. You have been shopping?’

‘Yes. We are having a party tonight at the Dower House and I found I had run out of practically everything.’

‘But what has gone wrong?’ he asked when he had been supplied with a cup of coffee. ‘You look wan, as if you had not slept.’

‘I didn’t, much,’ she said. ‘I have had rather a shock.’

‘What? Another?’

She told him about the unexpected completion of the aerodrome and the imminent departure of the entire American contingent.

‘So the *pension* will close,’ she finished. ‘It is too bad, the countess had hoped to keep open through September.’

‘She must have made a handsome profit already,’ Ghislaine commented unsympathetically, ‘and should be satisfied. For my part, I rejoice to hear that we are to see the backs of these Americans. Why are you so shocked? You have no deep affection for them, have you?’

'I like some of them immensely but it isn't that. It means my job is finished and I shall have to go home.'

'Go home? Surely not. It was understood that you were to remain here until the end of September, all your arrangements and doubtless those of Madame your aunt, in London, made to this effect. The countess will naturally expect you to stay on at the château.'

Lora shook her head.

'No, she isn't asking me to do that. I am to leave on Monday week.'

He gave her a searching look.

'And you do not want to go?'

'I can't bear to go!'

'Because of Gervais? You could not hope to alter anything by remaining. He has eyes and thought only for Lucienne.'

'I know he has,' Lora assented, untruthfully, thankful to see that Ghislaine, like the countess, was unaware of Gervais's defection. 'And it isn't because of him: that is all over.'

'What is it, then?'

'France. The valley. I love it all so; the life, the people, the very language——' they were, of course, speaking in French—'I feel as if I belonged here, I have felt from the first day that this is the place where I was meant to be. And now——' she broke off. 'I am being silly, I would have had to go, sooner or later. But I'll miss the vintage, your father has told me so much about it, traditional celebrations and all the excitement. However, there it is.'

Ghislaine sat steadily regarding the pretty face with its forced little smile and eyes that had widened like a pathetic child's.

'Don't go,' he said.

'But I must. I have just told you——'

'Come to Bellegarde.'

She looked astonished.

'To stay? Until after the vintage? I'd love to, it's awfully

kind of you to suggest it but I don't think I could—after being at the château and—~~e~~—'

'Not until after the vintage,' he interposed. 'For good and all, Lora.'

She stared at him, red lips parted, the pupils of her eyes dilating.

'You mean——'

'Can you not guess what I mean?'

'You are asking me to—*marry* you?'

'I am. Does the idea so appal you?'

She drew a breath.

'Are you out of your mind?'

'Out of my mind because I ask the honour of your hand? Come, Lora. As I have said before, you should set a higher value on yourself.'

'But you don't—you aren't in love with me—such a thing has never occurred to you until this minute. You *know* it hasn't.'

He grinned, unabashed.

'Now that it has occurred to me, it seems an excellent idea.'

Her lips twitched with amusement.

'It would serve you right, Ghislaine, if I took you up on it.'

'That is what I hope to persuade you to do.'

She looked at him, half laughing, half rebuking.

'You are quite mad. I don't want to sound ungracious if you are doing this because you—you are sorry for me—but it is really absolute nonsense.'

'No, it is not.' He was suddenly serious. 'Listen, Lora, and consider what I have to say. You do not want to leave the valley, you have found the life you most wish to lead. For my part, it is more than time that I arranged my affairs, settled myself. The life I had planned is—finished. You and I are tried friends, we have advanced from mutual distrust and dislike to a true affection. Is it not so?'

'Yes, it is so.'

'Then why not continue side by side? I think we could make a very good thing of life together. Would you not be

happier so than in returning to your drab city, living in your aunt's house instead of your own establishment, eating your heart out? English people, I have heard, delight in compromise; if they cannot have the best they take and find enjoyment in second best. *Allons*, let us follow this sensible example.'

Lora broke into irrepressible laughter.

'Ghislaine, who but you could have said that. So I would be—second best—for you? This *is* a flattering proposal.'

He grinned again.

'I would find contentment, at any rate. And, I venture to predict, you also, in time. *Eh bien*, what is your answer?'

For a wild instant she was tempted to consent. She cared more for Ghislaine de Boncourt than for anyone else, with a single exception. Gervais was for ever lost to her; then why not accept this astounding yet logical proposal, this *mariage de convenance* between two friends who shared the same tastes and would mutually benefit? Why not stay in the valley, make her home in that adorable old farmhouse at Bellegarde, become a member of the family to whom she was so much attached? Ghislaine undoubtedly counted upon their being willing to receive her or he would never have suggested it.

The alternative was to take up her rather dull life with Aunt Ella, occupy herself with her painting and a mild social round—and eat her heart out. 'Shall I say yes? *Shall I?*'

Then she came to her senses.

'No,' she said, 'it wouldn't do, wouldn't work.'

'Why not?'

'You and I are totally unfitted to marry each other. You want someone you can lead, domineer over——'

'Domineer!'

'Yes, you do,' she smiled. 'And I would not be ruled. We'd end up cat and dog. Besides, it is impossible, and you know it. Bellegarde and Beauvoir are too close.' She flushed. 'You would never forget that I had—once—it would rankle, Ghislaine——'

'On the contrary, I would not so insult you as ever to remember it.'

'You think so now. But the risk is too great. As for me——' she hesitated.

'Well,' he prompted, 'as for you?'

'I think,' she said gently, 'that you love Francine. Am I not right?'

His face hardened.

'That is done with.'

'But you do love her?'

'Perhaps. She has always been mine, from the time she was four years old, trotting at my heels, riding behind me—she took a perverse stand a short time ago but I supposed it some girlish tantrum easily overcome. Then, you know what happened.'

'But that is over too. If you have patience——'

His head went sharply up.

'Non. *Ça, c'est fini*. I have withdrawn my suit.'

'Well, you know your own business best. As for what you have offered to me—please believe that I truly appreciate it—I don't think I have said nearly enough——'

'*Bien, ma chère*. It is understood. You, also, know your own business best. But remember——' once more the strong white teeth flashed in a smile, half teasing, half serious. 'My offer stands. If you should re-consider, count me at your service.'

'I will remember,' she said gaily. 'It is a rash offer, I might yet take you at your word. I must go, Ghislaine.'

He escorted her to the car.

'We shall see you at Bellegarde before you leave, I will arrange it.'

'Thank you.' She gave him her hand and he clasped it warmly, looking down at her as she looked affectionately up at him.

'*À bientôt*, dear Lora.'

'*À bientôt*.'

As she started the engine she caught sight of a certain Madame Chantal, an elderly lady whom she had once or

twice met and knew to be a great crony of Tante Angele. Madame Chantal, crossing the *place*, was looking interestedly at the car and at Ghislaine de Boncourt standing on the kerb. Lora bowed to her, and drove away.

It was Friday evening. Lora had come back to the château, to the room with its tester bed and its windows overlooking the courtyard. She had arrived a short time ago and was changing her frock before going to the salon.

The American ladies had departed in a flurry of thanks and farewells that morning; Lora had remained to help the maids strip the beds and generally get the place in order. It had been a busy week during which she had felt as if she were moving in a fevered dream. She exercised Celeste as usual, the visit to Bellegarde had taken place, there were accounts to settle, standing orders to cancel, a hundred and one things to do. With it all, she was obsessed by the misery of her approaching departure and the chance that had been given her to remain. That chance, she had unequivocally refused, yet she found herself continually weakening.

Again and again she was crazily tempted to take Ghislaine at his word; he had seriously meant it, however impulsively the suggestion had been made in the beginning. It *might* work—it could be worth the risk—it would at least be a far happier thing than going home. Then once again she would come to her senses. At length she pulled herself together and stopped what she severely termed her idiotic dithering. She was going, and that was the end of it, spending a night in Paris with Lucienne who had already left. Lucienne's leave was not finished but her department was short-staffed and, being perfectly well, she explained that she felt it her duty to return. Lora heard her with inner amazement. How could she prefer her silly job to remaining down here with Gervais? But Lucienne, determined, sure of herself and of him, had gone.

Lora gave herself a final glance in the mirror and left the

room. How many times, in former days—but she must not think of this tonight. At the head of the staircase she gripped the banister tightly for an instant, then went down the stairs and into the salon. The countess was there with Madame de Bernine and Gervais. The ladies were engaged in animated discussion; Gervais rose, pulled out Lora's old chair and brought her a vermouth. She cast him a glance from under her lashes; he looked a trifle pale, the dark eyes strained, but he smiled at her and said, easily:

'Have you heard the news? Francie is coming back tonight.'

'Francie? Oh, I am so glad, I did want to see her before I left. I hadn't heard—no one told me—'

'We only knew ourselves, this morning,' the countess said. 'We had intended bringing her back very shortly now, but I received a somewhat cryptic letter from the Mother Superior, saying that in her opinion it was time for Francine to leave and she was taking it upon herself to send her home.'

'Is she coming alone?'

'No, it appears that Madame Levesque, on her way back from a little tour was to spend last night at the convent, her two younger daughters are pupils there. Mère Alphonsine has asked her to bring Francine home with her in the car. They should be here at any moment now.'

'I hope there is nothing—that Francine isn't ill——'

'She is quite well. Mère Alphonsine merely states that her corrective period has served its purpose and she is taking this opportunity to save us the trouble of going to fetch the child. Most considerate of her.'

But Lora saw that the countess was puzzled and uneasy; her own thoughts flew to Donald Carey. Was it possible? Had they communicated with each other? Could he have gained access to her in spite of the convent walls?

'*Écoute,*' the countess said. 'Is that not a car coming up the drive?'

A car it was; Nanon scuttled along the hall; there was a sound of voices, a woman saying,

'No, my compliments to Madame la Comtesse but I will not descend. I am anxious to arrive at home.'

Then came the patter of small light feet on the stone flags and Francine appeared. Lora, nearest to the door, sprang to meet her.

'Francie—darling——'

The younger girl jerked aside as if an adder had raised its head in her path. She made no reply, hurrying across the room. '*Maman*——' she flung herself into her stepmother's arms and burst into tears.

'My child—what is it? What has happened? Calm yourself, tell me—what have you done?'

'I!' Francine drew herself up, brushed a hand across her face and pointed to Lora who stood rebuffed and amazed in the doorway. 'Ask her—that false and treacherous girl there—what *she* has done—or is trying to do.'

'Francine,' Gervais thundered, 'how dare you speak so of Lora and treat her as you did when you entered? Are you demented?'

'Ask *her*,' Francine repeated.

'Will you cease your parrot cry! Explain your conduct at once.'

Lora came forward, an indescribable expression in her face, her eyes alight.

'Gervais—Madame—let me deal with this. It is my affair. Francie, what are you accusing me of?'

'Of taking or trying to take Ghislaine away from me, behind my back.'

'Good God!' Gervais ejaculated.

'Please, Gervais——' Lora cast him a glance and he stood silent. 'What reason have you to believe this, Francie?'

'What else can I believe? You spend half your time at Bellegarde, you ride and drive with Ghislaine, he has given you Celeste—*my* mare—you are seen alone with him in Ste. Anne, your hands clasped, gazing into each other's eyes—do you deny it, Lora?'

'None of it,' Lora answered coolly, conscious of a smothered gasp from the countess and Gervais's stupefied

stare, 'except that Ghislaine has given me Celeste. He could not do that since your stepbrother has bought and paid for her. I have only the pleasure of riding her.'

'You hear,' Francine cried. 'She admits it——'

'Why not? And why should you be so upset? You didn't want Ghislaine, you refused to be engaged to him and never had a good word for him. You fell in love with someone else——'

'I didn't understand. I was crazy, it was just a passing fancy——'

'I was not to know that, nor Ghislaine either. Are you telling us now that it is he you really cared for all along?'

Francine twisted her hands together.

'There has never been—he has always been there, belonging to me—only for a time I was foolish and didn't realize——'

'What has made you realize it now?'

'Hearing about him—and you.'

'How did you hear?'

'From Tante. She wrote to me, told me what I had none, and lost. She took a joy in it,' Francine declared with a vindictive look at her aunt.

'A joy,' Madame de Bernine cried. 'A joy to find that my brother's child had ruined her prospects? I simply told you that you had got what you deserved. Nor did I accuse Lora of treachery; she has a right to the man you yourself cast aside.'

'Good heavens,' her sister-in-law exclaimed, 'what is the meaning of all this? Ghislaine and Lora——'

'I'll explain in a minute, countess,' Lora said rapidly. 'What did you do when you got the letter, Francie?'

'I—I——' Francine twisted her small hands again. 'Mère Alphonsine found me——'

'And you confessed everything to her and she decided to send you home?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' Lora suddenly smiled, 'every word Madame de Bernine wrote you was true but she put a wrong interpretation upon it. I am not in love with Ghislaine nor he with

me. We're the best of friends, and no more. It's you he loves and always has and always will. You can believe me; I have his own word for it.'

'He—oh, Lora. Lora!'

'But there's just one thing, Francine. Ghislaine isn't going to approach your guardians again. He has been hurt, and he's a very proud young man. It is up to you; you must send for him, yourself.'

'Oh, I will. If Gervais permits——'

'I will permit,' Gervais said grimly. 'And now, Francine, you will make your apologies to Lora.'

'I do, with all my heart. Will you forgive me, Lora?'

'Willingly.'

Tante Angele said with obvious effort:

'It appears that I also should express regret. I was mistaken——'

Lora turned quickly to her.

'You were, Madame, but please don't regret. It is quite the best thing that could have happened.'

She glanced at Gervais and saw him regarding her with his quizzical expression. She guessed why; this *volte-face* on her part amused him after her impassioned advocacy of Donald Carey's claims. She gave him a little grimace in return, acknowledging defeat.

She had no talk with him that evening, but next morning as she came back from the Dower House where she had gone to collect any possible mail, she encountered him in the garden.

'So, Lora,' he said, 'you are reconciled to this marriage for Francine?'

'You mean,' she retorted, 'am I eating my words?'

'I would not put it so rudely as that. But you admit I was right?'

'I do. More right even than you know.' The hazel eyes suddenly danced; she drew a letter from her handbag and held it out to him. 'Read that, Gervais.'

The letter was from Donald Carey; he wrote from his own home, where, after flying back, he was spending a few

days' leave before being posted to Japan. He was in great luck, he declared, it meant promotion and he had always wanted to get to see Japan. Quite a crowd were going together, some swell girls among them, one of them his sister's best friend. He hoped things were fine with Lora, and that little Francine was okay. He'd never forget that darling kid, but he'd done a lot of serious thinking and had come to the conclusion that her stepbrother knew what he was talking about. She was so young—and being French and all—to uproot her like that—he saw now that it was a crazy idea and only hoped she had come round to seeing it too. Probably she had, she was so wrapped up in her family, he'd always known they came first with her. He would be grateful, all the same, if Lora would drop him a line and tell him how things stood; if Francine was still unhappy, then he, Donald, ought to be shot——

Gervais read the boyishly scrawled sheets to the end; Lora, her face a study, watching him. Then he folded and put them back in the envelope and looked up with a smile.

'It hasn't taken long.'

'Gervais, do you really think he has got over it? So soon?'

'I think there is no doubt that he has. It surprises you?'

'Surprises me! I can't believe——' she was half laughing, half scandalized.

'For my part,' Gervais said, 'I knew it was only infatuation, calf love, what you will. And it was stopped in time. After all, they had seen very little of each other.'

Lora drew a breath.

'Well, I shall certainly drop him a line and put his mind at rest. I'm astounded, but I am awfully glad. I was very sorry for him.'

'So was I. He's a good lad and—*attention*——' Francine came running towards them. He handed the letter to Lora and she hastily put it into her bag.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lora ascended the staircase of the small house in Kensington and glanced into the drawing-room; no one was there, Aunt Ella had not yet returned from her bridge club. With dragging feet she went on and up to her bedroom, crossed to the window and stood looking out at the bleak grey sky.

The summer, such as it had been in England, was over, although it was not yet the end of September; the day had been punctuated by heavy showers, driven by a chill wind. The city had a dismal appearance, weary and resigned. Lora was not resigned; on the contrary, as day succeeded day she became increasingly restless, her spirit straining towards another land, her inner eyes fixed always upon a lost valley. Aunt Ella had been pleased to see her niece at home again, although sorry her holiday had been cut short, and Lora's circle of friends welcomed her with enthusiasm, but the old verve had gone out of these relationships which once had sufficed for her.

She concealed her discomfort, taking up with outward placidity her former régime; the art academy had opened after a summer recess and she resumed her classes there. She rode, as she had been wont to do on a horse hired from a riding school, in Richmond Park, but it wasn't like riding Celeste along the wooded bridle-tracks and the banks of a laughing little river.

Standing now at her window, Lora's thoughts slid back once more. The final week-end had been eased of its tension by the return of Francine. Affectionate, remorseful, and distressed to find that Lora was to leave so soon, the younger girl hardly let the elder out of her sight during the next two days. She acted as an unconscious shield; with Francie continually at her side there was no risk of Lora finding 'erself alone with Gervais.

On Monday morning, very early, she had got up and

dressed and slipped away for a last look at the Dower House, imprinting upon her mind every detail of the lovely old building. Presently she said her good-byes to the countess and Madame de Bernine and dear Nanon and, still accompanied by Francine, was driven by Gervais into Ste. Anne to catch her train. Her entire being was concentrated upon self-control; she must not cry—she *must* not——

The train puffed slowly in as they reached the station; Gervais had timed it well, there would be no lingering on the platform. Francine hugged and kissed her, Gervais saw the luggage aboard, then escorted Lora into an empty compartment. For a moment they stood there, holding fast to each other's hands, their gaze locked. Then Lora drew a long, shuddering breath and her lashes came down. Gervais bent and swiftly kissed the closed eyes.

'Good-bye, my dear, my dearest.'

'Good-bye, Gervais.'

The engine uttered an eldritch squeak, the train jerked. Gervais sprang out, Francine waved, Lora waved blindly in return.

In Paris she was met by Lucienne and conducted to the latter's tiny flat on the Left Bank. Lucienne had arranged a little dinner, a *partie carrée*, at a neighbouring café, the two men guests being a young Tessier cousin employed in the city and a slightly older man who was in the French Foreign Office. Both were very pleasant to Lora, and Lucienne was all that was kind, but the English girl was conscious of a certain preoccupation in her hostess's manner, a hint of impatience, almost of edginess which made Lora wonder uncomfortably whether she had foregone some more attractive engagement in order to extend this hospitality. Lora had written to her from London, thanking her, but had received no reply; clearly, Lucienne had lost interest in her now that she had gone home and in all likelihood would never cross Mademoiselle Tessier's path again.

Natural enough, thought Lora, turning with a sigh from the window. Probably by this time everyone in the valley had ceased to think of her. As she began to make herself

presentable for dinner she heard Lady Clare's car draw up and sounds which indicated that Aunt Ella had either brought friends back with her or encountered them on the doorstep. A faint murmur of voices came up from below as Lora slowly brushed her hair and changed her frock; it was still early and she was in no hurry to go down. The murmur went steadily on; at length, half an hour or so later, there was a stir below, the sound of a door opening and closing and then Sara, the elderly parlour-maid, tapped on Lora's door.

'You are wanted in the drawing-room, please, Miss.'

Lora ran down and entered the room. There was no sign of Aunt Ella, only a tall man who advanced to meet her, his hands outstretched, his expression just a little diffident, as one who does not doubt his welcome but will not presume upon it.

'Lora?' he said in the tone she knew so well—and loved—and had never thought to hear again.

'Gervais! You!' One of her hands went sharply to her heart. 'What are you doing here?'

'I have come for you,' he said. 'To take you back to Beauvoir—as my wife—if you will consent—'

'*Your wife*——' she made a blind movement and he put an arm around her, drawing her down beside him on a settee.

'I have seen your aunt,' he said, 'she was just getting out of her car when my taxi drew up. We have had a talk, she knows the whole story and agrees that you and I should be married, here, as soon as the necessary formalities are completed.'

'Gervais——' she leant back against the arm that still encircled her, gazing at him as if she could not believe what she saw. 'But what has happened? You have told Lucienne? She has released you?'

'On the contrary, I have released Lucienne.'

Lora gasped.

'You mean that she—she——'

'I mean exactly that. Listen, Lora—I'll be as brief as I can——'

He told her that Lucienne had fallen deeply in love with a young diplomat, René de Lorient, who was equally in love with her.

'Monsieur de Lorient,' Lora exclaimed. 'I met him, he dined with us—very charming, *très mondain*, like Lucienne herself.'

Gervais nodded.

'He is. And far more suited to her than a simple wine grower in the *Basses Pyrénées*. Lucienne has always hated the country.'

He went on to explain that for some time René had laid passionate siege to Lucienne, imploring her to be frank with Gervais and obtain her freedom.

'But she would not jilt you, as you would not jilt her,' Lora said.

'No. Dear Lucienne; she felt the same obligation.'

The strain had been severe, telling upon her health; she had caught a cold which developed into pneumonia. Having recovered, she said what she fully intended to be a definite farewell to René and came down to her home to recuperate physically and mentally. Then, just after she had returned with the others from Biarritz she received a letter from him saying that he was to be sent as first secretary to an Embassy in South America.

This was too much for Lucienne. It was one thing to say good-bye to him, knowing that he was still in Paris; it was quite another thing to hear that he was leaving the country. Thinking desperately—and only—that she must see him once again, she had made her excuses and left at once.

The rest had followed. René continued to plead with her and in the end she had broken, wired Gervais to come to her and, when he arrived, made her confession. She could not give René up and had come to the conclusion that to marry, when one was irrevocably in love with someone else, would prove a tragic mistake.

'I felt that, too,' Lora murmured. 'But I could not say it—to you——'

'Our case was different, *chérie*. A woman has the privilege

of asking a man to release her but for a man to ask it of a woman——'

'Ça ne se fait pas?'

'Ça ne se fait pas.'

'Did you tell her about us? To make her feel better?'

'No. That would have been too much of a riposte at the moment. I simply wished her joy and assured her that I felt no resentment. The news will reach her later on; she has already left France with her husband.'

'Were her parents upset?'

'They were shocked, at first, but de Lorient is highly eligible. He comes of a distinguished family, has private means and will go far in his career. It is an excellent match for Lucienne.'

'And—the countess,' Lora asked fearfully. 'She must be——she cannot want——'

'I have a message for you from my mother. Unfortunately, she has developed an attack of sciatica which has prevented her from accompanying me as she wished to do. She sends you her love and blessing and eagerly awaits to welcome her daughter-in-law.'

'Oh——' Lora's lovely eyes filled with light. 'But her heart was set——'

'It was an alliance that seemed good to her from several points of view. But now that Lucienne has made other arrangements, maman is content. She is exceedingly fond of you, Lora; she has a strong regard and admiration for Lucienne but you have crept into her heart.'

'I am so glad—I love her, too. What about Madame de Bernine? I expect she has had something to say; I don't think she approves of me.'

'Tante is in complete agreement. She never approved of Lucienne, although naturally she identified herself with my mother's former plans. Now she is happy to welcome her new niece.'

'Her niece,' Lora echoed. 'Good gracious, so I shall be, as near as makes no matter. What a sobering thought.'

Gervais smiled.

'One has to have them, I trust the thought is not too much for you.'

'No. I can cope. Gervais—I can't believe it yet. I am going back to the valley——'

'You are coming back, with me.'

'And I'll live in the Dower House——'

'In the Dower House, Lora.'

'So I was right when I said it was mine.'

'You were right.'

His arm tightened about her, he drew her close and now, for the first time, he kissed her mouth. She gave herself up to the ecstasy of it; this was what she had longed for, ached for, this was why she had been born.

Presently she said,

'We are forgetting poor Aunt Ella—waiting for us, all by herself——'

A very odd look crossed Gervais's face.

'She is not alone,' he replied. 'And they—they seemed to be getting on well together——'

'They!' Lora sat upright with a jerk. 'Who—oh, is Francie here?'

'Not Francine. But my mother being unable to travel, it was considered imperative that some elder member of my family should attend our wedding, as a mark of respect to you and to Lady Clare.' Gervais paused and cleared his throat. 'In fine,' he said, 'Tante Angele has accompanied me.'